

Understanding Separation Anxiety
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It's that time of year when children go back to school and the family's routine changes. In many families, it is not uncommon for at least one adult or child to be home during the day in the summer.

In the fall, work and school schedules become more consistent and the family dog is often left alone for as long as eight or 10 hours. Dogs are very social animals, and making the transition from being with someone most of the time to being alone most of the time can be very difficult.

This change in routine can trigger separation anxiety in dogs that have a tendency to develop such problems. Research by Dr. Victoria Voith, a certified veterinary and applied animal behaviorist found that dogs found as strays or obtained from humane societies are more prone to separation problems. This may be related to the traumatic experience of being abandoned or lost. However separation anxiety problems can also be triggered by changes in the family's schedule, a move to a new environment or the death of another family pet.

Dogs with separation anxiety become anxious when they are separated from their owners. When dogs are anxious they can be destructive, bark or howl excessively, housesoil, and/or try to escape from the house or yard.

Destructive behavior is often directed toward doors and windows through which the owner leaves, furniture where the owner frequently sits or the owner's clothing or other possessions such as the TV remote control, which have the owner's scent. If left alone in the house, dogs have been known to tear up large pieces of carpet in front of the door, chew on doorknobs, tear down drapes or blinds, scratch door molding and tear through dry wall.

When outside, separation anxiety dogs can turn into escape artists, sometimes injuring themselves as they tunnel under, jump over, or chew through fences. Once out of the yard, they often sit on the front porch and wait for their owners' return. These behaviors usually begin within 30 minutes of the owner's departure and are not motivated by spite or revenge for being left, but instead by anxiety that can border on panic.

Confining a dog with separation anxiety to a crate or other small area can be disastrous. Such confinement only prevents opportunities for destructive or housesoiling behavior but does not lessen the dog's anxiety.

Consequently, most dogs try to get out of the crate and may break teeth, or cut their faces, legs or paws trying to escape. It is also not helpful to punish or scold the dog for the misbehavior upon arriving home. The dog has no idea why she is being punished and can begin to anticipate the owner's arrival with more anxiety and therefore more misbehavior. The way to resolve such problems is to decrease the dog's anxiety about being left alone.