



Coping alone

Dogs are social animals and it's not unusual for them to feel worried when they are left, especially for the first time. They aren't born knowing how to feel okay when they're on their own, so it's important to teach them to feel confident and relaxed by themselves, ideally when they are still a puppy.

Teaching dogs to cope alone is important to help prevent separation anxiety from developing, so the sooner you can prepare them, the better.

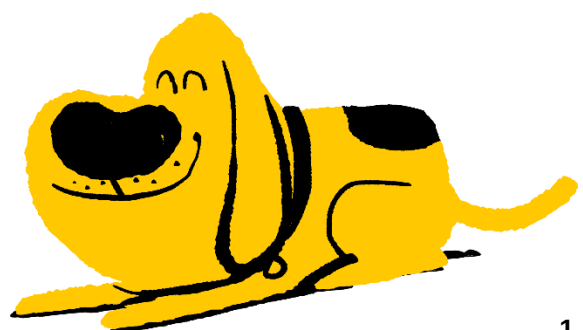
If your dog is already showing signs of distress when separated, such as making a mess or a lot of noise, then please contact your vet who can make sure they're in good health. They can then refer you to a qualified behaviourist.

Teach your dog how to be alone

Make sure your dog has a comfy bed or doggy den of their own, where they can rest undisturbed. Introduce your dog to their den in advance, when you are around, so they become familiar with it being a safe place.

Build up positive associations with the space by offering your dog things they enjoy in there, such as a long-lasting chew, puzzle feeder or favourite toy. Just make sure whatever you provide won't cause your dog to feel frustrated.

Teach your dog to settle down calmly when you are busy. This will help them to cope better when you're not there at all. Our **Settle** handout explains how to do this.

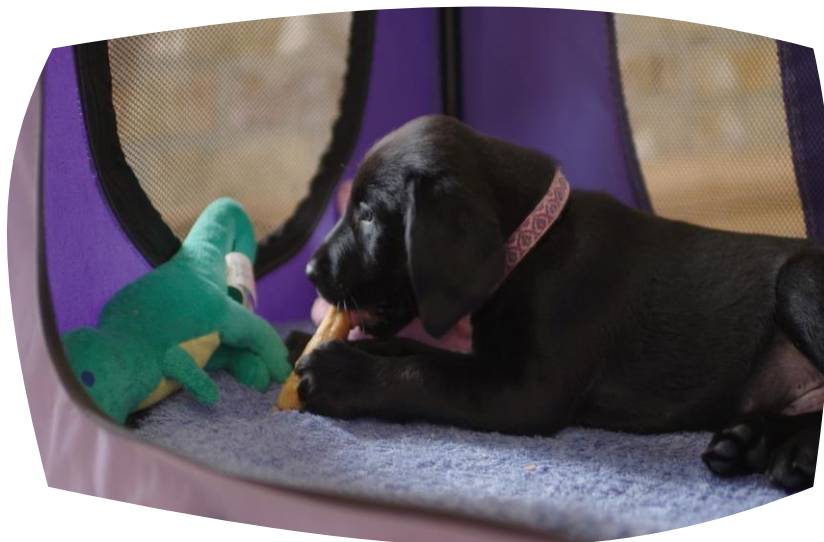


Avoid giving your dog attention when they follow you around the house. Instead, calmly praise them when they are settling by themselves or interacting with their toys. They'll soon learn that it's boring to follow you everywhere, and it's enjoyable to be by themselves! This will help to build independence.

Try to factor in time apart from your dog each day, only for brief periods to begin with. If your dog stays calm, you can gradually build up the time apart. You can use child gates across doorways to introduce separation within the house.

Providing your dog is comfortable with you leaving the room for brief periods, you can begin to leave the house for short periods too. Start by popping into the garden or stepping outside the front door, before returning. If your dog stays calm, you can begin to build up the time you leave the house for.

Make sure you always go at your dog's pace. If your dog shows signs of being worried when separated – for example, barking, whining, panting or scratching at the door – you know you're progressing too quickly. You need to go back to a stage where they were comfortable and progress much more slowly. The aim is for your dog to feel relaxed at every stage.



Prepare your dog for being left home alone

Before you leave your dog at home, there are a few things you can do to help them feel calm.

- Take your dog for a long and engaging walk before you go out. This will give them a chance to burn off some energy, tire themselves out and go to the toilet.
- Make sure your dog has access to water and something to keep them happily occupied, such as a safe, long-lasting treat.

- You could also leave an old item of clothing that smells like you – and don't forget that comfy bed or doggy den, which will help them feel safe and relaxed. Leaving the TV or radio on may also help with this.
- Avoid getting your dog over-excited when you leave or return – you don't want to make it a big deal for them. Start by getting everything ready, so you can leave calmly. You could also use a word or phrase (such as “see you later”) that helps to establish a routine.
- Try not to leave your dog for too long. If you do have to go out for longer, you could organise for someone to pop in or for your dog to go to doggy day care.

Find out what **your dog gets up to**

If you're not sure what your dog gets up to when you go out, it's a great idea to set up a video camera. Position this in the area where your dog spends most of their time. Dogs who feel anxious might spend time at or near the door that you leave through, so you could set up a camera that covers this area too.

You may need to try a few times before you find the best place to record what your dog gets up to. When you get it right, check the video for signs of anxiety.

Signs to **look out for**

If your dog is struggling, they may show some of these signs when left:

- Whining
- Barking/howling
- Pacing
- Trembling
- Panting
- Drooling
- Toileting
- Destructive behaviour, such as scratching and chewing at doorways or furniture.



If you come home and your dog has made a mess, avoid telling them off.

They won't know why you're telling them off as they don't understand that this is 'wrong'. Telling them off is likely to make things worse, as they'll be worried about you coming home, as well as feeling anxious about being left.

What to do if your dog struggles

If you identify signs that your dog may be struggling, talk to your vet about a referral to a behaviourist. It's important to contact your vet first so they can check that there are no medical problems that may be influencing your dog's behaviour before helping you find a qualified behaviourist.

As separation problems can develop for different reasons, treatment programmes need to be tailored to individual dogs. Programmes usually include a number of different elements, which might include the following aspects:

- Encouraging your dog to not be too reliant on your attention when you are at home, so that they can cope better when you are not there.
- Gradually teaching your dog that it is okay to be alone in the house through a process called 'desensitisation and counter-conditioning.'
- Changing any associations your dog may have made about the events leading up to you leaving the house.
- In some cases, making sure that your dog has had sufficient exercise and mental stimulation to help them settle down when left.

If you need help, you can find out how to source an accredited behaviourist here: dogstrust.org.uk/help-advice/behaviour/finding-behaviour-and-training-support

Contacts for further support

We provide lifelong telephone-based behavioural support for all our adopted dogs. If you need help for your **Dogs Trust dog** please email:

postadoptionssupport@dogstrust.org.uk

Everyone else can access support by emailing our training and behaviour helpline:

behavioursupportline@dogstrust.org.uk

Your nearest Dog School Team are also happy to help and can be contacted via:

dogstrustdogschoo.org.uk

The advice contained in this handout is of a general nature and is no substitute for specific behavioural or veterinary advice. If you are worried about your dog, then do consult your vet.

A dog is for life ®

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