

WOODVALE PARK

VETERINARY HOSPITAL



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DOGS THAT DESTROY WHEN ALONE

Adult dogs exhibit a number of problem behaviours when distressed by separation from their owners, the most common and actionable being destructiveness. Chewing, scratching or digging when away from the owner must be distinguished from similar activities of the puppy or accompanied adult dog. A quite different approach to treatment is required for the latter. The prospects for resolving or easing these separation problems are quite favourable if a logical rather than an emotional approach is adopted.

The lonely, destructive dog is usually a most lovely and loved pet that tries to spend every moment in human company. The general relationship between dog and family has to be changed from the clinging and indulgent to an independent, even cool style. Destructive tendencies are not modified by punishment or reunion, nor by the assertive obedience training. Indeed, our evidence suggests that excessive punishment of a juvenile dog for toileting and other minor misdemeanours strongly predispose the adult dog to separation problems. Insecurity rather than malice provokes panic of which howling, loss of accustomed toilet control and destructiveness are the symptoms. They do not do these things to “get back at you”, as dogs do not have the ability to think this way.

TREATMENT :

There are two main aspects to overcoming this problem ; in the short term property must be protected, but thereafter a less attached dog – human relationship is required. The treatment plan given below is of general relevance to most separation problems. Individual cases may be more or less complex and treatment tailored accordingly.

1. Environmental :

Short term, can the dog be excluded from items of value? For example to a kennel (indoors or out), a garage or porch. Do not release it into the garden or street.

2. Physical :

If damage is predominantly by chewing, you can muzzle the dog. If the muzzle is well designed and fitted, and not left on for more than 3 to 4 hours, this is an entirely reasonable short-term approach. Adapt the dog to wearing the muzzle when at home by play, then gradually increase the time spent muzzled alone. An ideal muzzle is one called a “**Husher**”, it is designed for the purpose of behaviour modification

3. Pre-separation :

Whilst destructive dogs are rarely “bored” dogs their needs for exercise, interest and food must be satisfied. A daily long walk including off-leash play with other dogs is essential, followed by half or more of daily food ration. Satiety provokes sleep.

4. Separation :

The relationship during the time immediately prior to departure (half an hour) must be especially off-hand, even rejecting. Loving departures contrast the desolation of being alone, so be cool instead. Vary the length and time of your departures.

5. Comforters :

Things should be as pleasant as possible for the dog when alone, with physical, chemical and audio reminders of the human companions. Thus, ideally the dog will be given the run of the house, garden (dog flap) and even the bedroom. It may panic when restricted to the kitchen or kennel but relax when all doors are open. Leave the radio or T.V. on, even a tape recording of familiar human voices. Allow them to lie on worn items of the owners clothing. Leave with long-lasting chews and favourite toys. There are toys designed for the purpose of stimulating and occupying dogs. They encourage the dog to play and therefore be occupied for hours.

6. Training :

The duration of separation may be the critical factor. Damage is usually done shortly after departure and in the expectation of a long separation. Thus, leave the dog for frequent short spells of variable but gradually

increasing duration. For some dogs that might mean seconds, for others hours alone. Preliminary training can involve separating the dog to different parts of the house and garden, doors being closed to prevent them following you.

7. Reunions :

Dogs usually looked pleased when their owners return, but destructive dogs may wear an expression of “guilt” (this is actually a look of fear as they wait for their punishment). *DO NOT PUNISH*, reprimanding is only effective when it is done *during* the crime, not afterwards. The dog will not comprehend why you are unhappy with them. Always be loving on arrival home.

8. Emotional :

The hardest and most important part of overcoming separation problems is to develop a cooler, more independent relationship. Specifically less time in contact, e.g.: 30% of time separated by a door, not sleeping in the bedroom. Also less verbal and physical affection. Ideally the dog will develop new expectations from a combination of cool departures and warm reunions. The notion that separation is preliminary to affection.

9. Drugs :

There are new drugs that have recently been made available to help with the dog’s anxiety while he is being re-conditioned. These drugs are only available on prescription, so the vet needs to check your dog over and discuss these problems before dispensing medication. Often a consultation with an animal behaviourist is needed. In a few cases, and as a last resort, the behavioural approach may be introduced or combined with sedation.

Some owners may decide that the financial and emotional costs of curing the destructive dog are too high ...

What other options are available?

One can stay home, hire a dog sitter or take the dog to “doggy day-care” (yes – this does exist), short-term boarding or just put up with the problem.

Too many owners rehome or reject the dog and thereby pass the problem on to someone else.

PLEASE DO NOT DO THAT, PHONE US FIRST, WE MAY BE ABLE TO HELP.