**Separation Anxiety Syndrome**

**Causes and Solutions for Canine Separation Anxiety**

Home Alone Syndrome (or HAS, also known as Separation Anxiety Syndrome) is one of the more common sets of behavioral problems exhibited by dogs. HAS describes a set of unacceptable behaviors which occurs when the dog is left alone. These behaviors include: distress vocalization (whining, barking, howling) destructiveness, house soiling, and in some rare instances, aggression toward family members when they attempt to leave the house.

Research and clinical reports have found that problems arising from the separation of the dog from the owners are a response to the stress and tension the dog feels in an “alone” situation. Separation Anxiety normally occurs within 30 minutes of the owner’s departure. If the behavior occurs beyond this time frame the results are of another cause.

**What Causes HAS?**

The clue lies in the profiles of dogs more likely to exhibit HAS. We know that dogs are pack animals. They thrive and function best in a bonded situation, be it human or canine. Genetically, dogs are programmed to bond as a means of survival. There is safety in numbers as pack members depend on one another. Lone wolves are the exception, not the rule, in the wild.

Studies in England indicate that HAS accounts for more than 20% of all reported pet dog problems. It is thought that an arrested early socialization process or an interruption in a bonded relationship with humans results in dogs exhibiting HAS.

HAS is seen most frequently in dogs that were purchased in pet stores, adopted from shelters, or rescued from the streets.

All three groups show a disrupted socialization process and relationship pattern. Pet store dogs that originate in puppy mills are separated from their littermates and their mother as early as 4 weeks of age. These dogs have a higher incidence of dog aggression as well as non-recognition of other dogs as being species related. In addition, pet store dogs identify strongly with humans and develop an intense dependency. Often dog owners innocently remark that their dog “doesn’t know he’s a dog”.

Shelter dogs and dogs rescued from the streets may exhibit HAS reactive behavior. Although early socialization may have been present, shelter and street dogs may be reacting to a recent episode of abandonment, straying, or being given up if the owners moved or no longer wanted them. Many shelter dogs may have initial brief periods (less than 21 days) of intense HAS. In these cases, both the frequency and intensity diminishes and extinguishes if the problem is handled properly. Studies have shown that the frequency and intensity of HAS in pet store, shelter, and street dogs can be affected by the owner if they perceive themselves as rescuers and their dogs as victims.

**Misconceptions**

Many owners attribute their dog’s unacceptable HAS behaviors to human-like responses such as spite or revenge. They believe their dog is “getting even” with them for being left alone. Many people believe that the dog exhibits inappropriate behavior due to lack of obedience training. Others believe that the dog is reacting because it is spoiled or has been over-indulged. While none of these reasons is entirely true, there is some truth in each reason.
Solving the Problem

We know that dogs are pack animals and most dogs do not differentiate between a pack of dogs or humans or a mix of both. Being alone is not a natural state. This is readily seen in young puppies first separated from their littermates and mother. They become anxious and first try distress vocalization which would immediately bring their mother or littermates to them.

A crate or box with toys, a hot water bottle wrapped in a towel, and a ticking clock usually settles the puppy down within a few nights. This distress of separation must be relieved. How to do this with a puppy or an adult dog depends on the environment of the dog, the temperament of the dog, past experiences during socialization periods in the dog’s life, and the relationship of the dog to its owner. Most behaviorists recommend that to extinguish behavioral problems brought on by separation anxiety it is best to proceed gradually. In short, the dog is desensitized to being left alone through counter conditioning and shaping techniques. The goal is to gradually get the dog accustomed and comfortable when left alone.

Planned Departures and Short Separations

Dogs do best with a daily routine. If your dog is exhibiting mild to severe HAS, it’s time to change the routine. This can be done on several levels at the same time.

1. **Teach the dog to sit/stay.** Place the dog beside you and give it the command, “sit”. Give the command “stay” with a hand signal in front of the dog’s face. Count to five and release and praise. When the dog can “sit/stay” for about 30 seconds, give the command, then step around in front of the dog. Begin with small increments of 3 to 5 seconds and build up to a minute or two. Always remember to release the dog and praise. When you feel the dog is comfortable at close range, begin to move back a foot at a time until you are at the end of the leash. If the dog breaks and runs toward you decrease the distance until he/she is comfortably sitting for two minutes. At some point drop the leash and walk away from the dog beyond the point of the leash. Within a few days you should be able to walk away from the dog, step into another room and then quickly come back into sight. Begin extending the out-of-sight time. Throughout this exercise you are shaping the behavior gradually in small segments (staying while you walk away) by counter conditioning (teaching the dog “sit/stay”) to counter the behavior (running away).

2. **“Sit/stay” the dog so that you are moving away toward the door.** When the dog can hold the sit/stay without following you, open the door and then close it. Eventually step outside and close the door. Return immediately. If the dog has stayed, release the dog from the command and calmly praise. Increase the amount of time you are outside.

3. **Cue the dog to your departure.** Calmly say to the dog “I’ll be back” or “Guard the house”. Leave and then return with a neutral matter-of-fact attitude. Over enthusiastic greetings given by the dog should be ignored. If your dog seems relaxed, repeat the exercise and begin extending the time outside by 30 second increments. Departures can be practiced several times a day or before you actually leave for an extended period of time. Practice on the weekends and during the evening. If the dog seems to lose interest in you and practice sessions – great! When your dog can tolerate absences of anywhere from 30 to 90 minutes, you will gradually be able to extend this time to 2 to 3 hours and longer. This eventually will lengthen to longer times and eventually to 8 to 10 hours. (You may want to think about why you have a dog if you are gone for over 9 or 10 hours a day.)
Establishing a Daily Routine

Dogs are more secure and relaxed when life is predictable. Without rules and routines, the world can become a very scary and threatening place. Although dogs are dogs, and not small people in fur suits, they do share similar needs and emotional responses with their human companions. Dogs are reactive. Remember to consider the needs of a dog:

- to be a valued member of the pack
- to have food, water & vet care
- to have an emotionally stable environment in which the dog feels safe and secure
- to have regular exercise and interaction with the pack leader.

Do not expect the dog to function at a human level. It is the owner’s responsibility to learn to function at the dog’s level.