

Helping your dog cope when home alone

Dogs are naturally social animals, so it's normal for them to feel worried when they're left on their own. They aren't born knowing how to feel okay when they're all by themselves, so it's important to teach your dog to feel confident and relaxed about being home alone.

Teaching a dog to cope when home alone should ideally start when they are still a puppy. If your dog is already showing serious signs of separation distress, such as making a mess or a lot of noise, then please contact your vet who can make sure they're in good health, and then refer you to a qualified behaviourist.

Setting your dog up for success!

First teach them to be confident and relaxed when you are home, but busy and unable to give them your attention:

- ❁ Make sure your dog has a comfy and cosy bed or covered den all of their own, away from the main thoroughfare of the house and distracting activities. Make sure they are never disturbed whenever they are in their bed.



- ❁ Encourage them to spend time in their bed when you are engaged in another activity, watching TV or cooking for example, by giving them a tasty chew or a food-releasing toy there. They'll soon learn to enjoy these times when you are busy and can't give them direct attention, and they'll see their bed as a great place to be in by themselves. This will help them to cope better when you're not there at all.
- ❁ It's normal for dogs to want to be with us but teaching your dog not to follow you around the house is a good idea because it will help them not to rely on you being present all the time. If they do follow you, don't speak to them, make eye contact or touch them. Don't feel mean doing this, you're just teaching them that following you everywhere is boring! This will help them when you actually have to leave them all alone.
- ❁ If your dog persists in following you, it's important that you don't tell them off or to "go away". Even though you're trying to discourage them you might make them anxious and confused so they might seek your attention even more! Remember to ignore unwanted behaviour and reward good behaviour.

Now start teaching your dog to cope as you move a little further away

It's important to introduce and practice separation gradually and very slowly build up your dog's tolerance for being on their own. Pick a time to practice when you and your dog are both calm and relaxed.

- ❁ You can use baby-gates across doorways to teach your dog that you can be at a distance from them without them having to worry. They'll be able to see you, hear you and smell you but just not physically connect with you.



- ❁ Just before going through the baby-gate scatter some treats onto the floor for your dog to search for, or give them a toy, chew or food-releasing toy to play with by themselves. They'll be learning that being alone is okay because they'll be having a good time! If you haven't got a baby-gate don't worry, just gently close the door, but be aware you're completely going out of sight, so this is a big step! Stay outside only for a very short time to begin with.
- ❁ Start with very short periods (e.g. just one minute to begin with) then gradually build up the length of time you are away from your dog, as long as they remain relaxed.
- ❁ Gradually increase the time before you return to the room. If your dog becomes worried or shows signs of anxiety, try staying closer to the gate if you are using one, or go back to leaving him for a shorter duration. If they cannot cope with this level of separation stop and contact a qualified behaviourist for guidance.
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Preparing for success when you are leaving your dog alone at home

- ❁ Take your dog for a good walk and ensure they go to the toilet before you leave. Remember to leave them with water and food if they haven't eaten already.
- ❁ Prepare your things beforehand so you can leave quickly and calmly without agitating your dog by rushing around stressed.

- ❁ Establish a leaving routine, use a special word or phrase (that you only use when you leave), for example “stay and be good”. Routine lets your dog know what happens next, and consistency helps your dog feel secure.
- ❁ Leave your dog with a food-releasing toy or something safe that is long lasting and tasty to eat. Ideally it should last at least 15 minutes and be as delicious and fun as possible, for example a Kong toy stuffed with dry kibble dog food, meat soaked in a little water, or ‘squeezy cheese’. Refrigerating it in readiness might help to make it last a little longer.
- ❁ Leave an old item of clothing that smells of you in your dog’s bed.
- ❁ Leave the TV or radio on to help muffle any external noises.
- ❁ Once they can cope alone, think about how long your dog can go between toilet breaks, and don’t leave them for longer than this period of time.



If your dog is struggling to learn to cope being all by themselves a qualified behaviourist will be able to help you teach them.

These resources have been created by Dogs Trust using the most up-to-date scientific-based understanding of dog behaviour and welfare needs and can be freely downloaded by anyone interested in learning more about understanding dog behaviour and training dogs.