



Separation Distress and Separation Anxiety in Shelter/Rescue Dogs

By Nancy Frensley, CAP2, CPDT
Behavior & Training Manager
Berkeley-East Bay Humane Society

Separation distress is a common behavior found in wild canids, domestic dogs, and all other social mammal species. It takes the form of attachment to a place, person or other animal. The evolutionary purpose of separation distress behavior is to prevent the pup from wandering too far from the family group and to assist the mother in locating him. Distress behaviors are strong, instinctive behaviors that enable the pup to bond and communicate with his family group. Nature has designed a system that enables the family group to raise the pup and give him independence gradually. In wild canids, the process of maturing and gaining independence is well timed. Separation distress goes away gradually and rarely becomes a problem.

Even in the best of circumstances, domestic puppies have a different experience. Most puppies are removed from their mothers and siblings before they are biologically and psychologically ready. From there, they may go into homes where they are abruptly isolated for long periods of time. Dogs and puppies express distress as vocalizations and attempts to get close to the object of their attachment. When vocalizations don't produce a response, the puppy feels helpless. As a result, when he or she is finally reunited with his or her new family members, the greetings are often highly emotional and reinforce the puppy's desire to find comfort in contact. Most puppies are able to eventually adapt and the distress behavior goes away. However, in some cases, normal distress can turn into anxiety and panic, which, in turn, becomes separation anxiety.

Separation distress is the term used to describe mild, short-lived vocalizations, destruction, and following or "shadowing" family members. Separation *anxiety* is considered a medical condition and is usually characterized by extreme expressions of distress that can include trembling, drooling, and extreme destruction around doorways and windows. Each condition is a result of excessive attachment to a place, person or animal. It's not surprising that some dogs adopted from shelters have had poor experiences with separation. Unable to control their environment while being shifted around from place to place and finally into a shelter, they are often confused and frustrated. It's amazing that some dogs are resilient enough to endure what most of them have endured. Once they are placed in a home setting, with people that love them, it's easy for them to become excessively attached. They act out with the tools nature has provided them: vocalizing, shredding and seeking a way to rejoin those that make them feel safe at last.

A small percentage of shelter and rescue dogs, at some point, may exhibit distressed behavior when left alone. They might seem to be functioning well in a home for some time before exhibiting signs of distress. You can help prevent separation problems with your new dog with a structured program and, odds are, you will be successful if you remain committed to the program for a sufficient length of time.

Dogs exhibit the tendency to over-bond in a number of subtle ways. They might refuse to leave the house or go out with anyone but the person they choose. They may shadow their chosen person(s), following from room to room, never letting the object of affection out of sight and often panting. In the worst-case scenario, the dog might start guarding the chosen person, threatening or snapping if others try to touch him or her. Either right from the beginning or over time, the dog will vocalize continually when unable to join the person. Dogs who are having significant separation issues may also drool excessively when confined, such as in a dog crate, as well as tremble uncontrollably. If left alone with the run of the house, they will cruise doors and windows continually. Destruction will usually be around these openings. If left alone while confined, they may attempt to escape a crate, resulting in injuries to teeth and gums. If the behavior gets to this point, your dog will require professional medical and behavioral help.

Preventing separation problems is largely a matter of providing a structure in which the dog can learn to feel safe while being alone. Prevention from day one is the best way to keep over-bonding (or, as it is called in the lexicon of behavior, “hyper-attachment”) from occurring. Since the cause of such dependency is usually abrupt change rather than gradual growth toward independence, setting up your dog’s routine so that he is left alone for short, tolerable periods at the beginning is the best approach. Using an indoor tie-down and alternating it with a pen or crate, you can go from room to room in your house, or from inside to out. It’s best to adopt a dog when you have a few days at home to start this routine.

Do your best to get your dog to enjoy chewing appropriate items, such as bully sticks or food-stuffed rubber toys, before confining him or her with them. When you do confine him or her, put the chew toy into the confinement space while you sit near it for the first few sessions. Encourage your dog to chew. Once your dog is using the chew toy and seems to be enjoying it, start walking away for about a minute at a time. When you return, praise your dog in a soft, soothing voice, and release him or her for a play-time with you. As the days go on, you can be gone into another room or outside the house for longer periods of time.

Here are some other routines that will help your dog gain independence.

- Ask for simple obedience skills when your dog solicits affection and attention.
- Keep your behavior during both greetings and exits calm and matter-of-fact instead of emotional and exuberant.
- Let your dog “earn” his or her way out of confinement.
- Make the environment as predictable as possible. Control over his or her environment is a key factor in making a dog confident.