



## RSPCA School for Dogs Information Sheet

# Home Alone

### Don't leave me!

Dogs are social animals, and generally love to be around people. So one of the most stressful things a dog can experience is being left home alone. This stress can often be expressed by barking/whining, destructive behaviours and even escaping.

Some dogs just don't know how to be home alone, especially dogs from animal shelters that may have had several homes or been a stray. When they get adopted, they want to hold onto their new family with everything they have!

Similarly if you have a new puppy, they have suddenly been taken away from their litter mates and all they know in the world. Once they are in a new home, they need to be taught how to be home alone gradually. They need to learn that their humans will be coming back, they are not deserting them.



### Outside is good!

Teach your dogs that spending time outside and on their own is good! They don't need you around to have a good time. Give them treats and scatter feed in the yard so they have little surprises to hunt for. Give them bones or a sand pit - whatever they love to do, make sure they spend time outside having a good time on their own with and without you at home. Start with short periods of time (30 seconds) and build it up slowly. Don't give your dog a chance to begin to vocalise or get wound up before returning to your dog.

### If outside is TOOOOOO stimulating

For many dogs problems start when they are outside and don't know how to relax. Teach your dogs that they don't have to run around all the time they are outside. Spend time outside relaxing and encouraging your dog to relax as well.

If this is still too much you may need to reduce the stimulation visually and audibly. You may need to find an appropriate denning or crating space.

### Going to and from work...

It is important that your dog doesn't think of you leaving home in the morning as a bad thing. If your dog gets stressed or upset by your leaving, it is important that you reduce the effect that leaving home has on your dog. You can provide distractions such as scatter feeding, Kong toys,



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treat balls, bones, ice-blocks, wading pools, digging pits and hanging toys to help keep your dog busy and having fun while you are away.

Try not to make a fuss of your dog when you leave in the morning or when you arrive home at night. Many people like to spend a good 10 minutes saying goodbye to their dog before they leave and hello games when they get home, but this is often the worst thing you can do. This can get your dog aroused and can build anxiety levels which then gets them all wound up before you have even left home. Try throwing your entertainment out for the dogs 10, 20, 30, 40 or even 60 minutes before you leave - vary it. Don't let your dog sit and watch you get ready. When it's time to go, leave your dog doing their thing with the bones and toys - don't distract them to say goodbye, just go.

Remember to throw your Kongs and toys out sometimes when you are home as well. The idea is for your dogs not to know the difference between you leaving or staying, so mix it up a bit! Variety is the spice of life!

When you get home say hi by all means, but don't get them too excited. Go inside and put all your things down, change your clothes and have a breather, then go out and have your afternoon game or walk. Again, vary the time that this happens and how long it happens for. Don't let your dog always know what is coming next.

### **Too much routine can be a bad thing...**

While there are many benefits to setting up a good routine when you first get your puppy home, this routine can sometimes get you into trouble later on. Some dogs learn to rely so much upon their routine that when something goes a little differently they start to show signs of stress. If your dog is beginning to show signs of stress when being left on its own, have a look at your 'routine'. Do you take the dog for a walk at the same time everyday? Do you walk the same route? Do you feed your dogs and put them to bed at the same time each day? Do you play with them at the same time?

If your dog becomes too dependent on an everyday routine, they may not be able to cope with change. You may need to change things up very gradually to help your dog cope better in the long run.

### **Home alone training**

If you already have a dog who doesn't like being left alone or if you have a new puppy, the first step starts with teaching your dog to be by itself in lots of different situations. You may need to start with leaving your dog in another room, or walking around the house without your dog following you, or leaving them in the backyard.

The key to success with this training is to start with as shorter period as your dog can cope with. This may be seconds!



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For example, your home alone training plan may look like this:

1. With your dog in the yard, sprinkle a few treats on the ground and step away from your dog.
2. Sprinkle a few treats on the ground and move a few steps towards the back door. Come straight back to your dog.
3. Next step put your hand on the door handle. Come straight back to your dog.
4. Turn the door handle, Come back to your dog
5. Open the door, come back to your dog
6. Step inside the door for a second, come back to your dog
7. Step inside the door for a few seconds, come back to your dog
8. Gradually increase the time you can leave your dog until you can build up to about 10 - 15 minutes.
9. At all times, make sure that your dog isn't stressed (this could look like your dog racing after you or scratching at the door).
10. Make sure you don't make a big deal when you return to your dog, just stay calm.

### A plan to desensitise the triggers

Some dogs get anxious when they recognise certain behaviours their owners do before they leave the home. It can be things like brushing teeth, putting on a particular pair of shoes, picking up car keys, shutting the curtains or blinds, the wearing of a uniform etc.

Dogs can be desensitised to these triggers gradually. You may need to pick up your car keys 10 times per day and carry them around with you, or put your work shoes on 10 times per day, but just sit down and read a book. The idea is that you teach your dog that these triggers do not always mean that you are leaving.

Identify all the triggers you think may be causing your dog to be anxious and try desensitising each one in separate training sessions over time. The time it takes to desensitise depends on each individual dog.

### In summary

Start teaching puppies as early as you can to be by themselves in short training sessions.

If you have a newly adopted adult dog, start training home alone exercises.

If you already have a dog who gets anxious when left alone, start home alone training and also desensitising to any triggers you identify.

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