

Home Alone Without the Guilt

Here's how to help your dog deal with solitude when you walk out the door. **BY DAVIA SILLS**

When dog owners pick up their bag and take a step or two toward the door, their pooches know exactly what that means. Their person is leaving them alone. The canines' eyes open wide, silently begging. A few whimpers escape. They may even start shaking. Most pet owners have experienced this scenario. Whether they're gone the whole day at work or just a few minutes on a short errand, like taking out the trash or picking up the mail, the thought of leaving a dog alone in such emotional pain is heartbreaking.

While some dogs might be able to calm themselves down given time, others may experience more extreme separation anxiety over their person's absence as minutes and hours pass. They're often by the front door, "crying, howling, scratching, eliminating," observes Christina Shusterich, dog behavior expert and owner of NY Clever K9, Inc. Painful emotions can drive a dog to act out in destructive ways,

unless they're distracted and their energy is redirected to more positive outlets.

"Dogs are animals and, you know, they're not going to be spending their time watching TV or surfing the Net or reading books or anything like that. So the way they're happiest is if we meet their needs as animals in our homes," Shusterich explains. With a little preparation, dog owners can ensure that their canine companions not only survive their time home alone, but also thrive.

WEARING OUT THE DOG

When pet owners go out, especially for longer periods of time, they often "leave a dog all by itself and wanting to do something, and nobody's home," says Pat Marshall, dog trainer and owner of Happy Hounds Training Center. This is a recipe for disaster, as the dog tends to "find things to do on their own, and they're usually not things we like," Marshall adds. She recommends that dog owners take the time to go out and exercise and play

Your dog can detect your scent before you even manage to walk through the door.

Some dogs wait anxiously by the door, the last place they saw their humans.



A collection of soft toys can help distract your pooch while you run errands during the day.

out how the toy works and what behaviors are necessary in order to gain the prize. One example is the dog pyramid, which bobs and rolls around on its own as the dog tries to reach the food inside, keeping the pup entertained for hours.

Toys don't have to involve food; they can also appeal to the dog's animal instincts. Extra-durable balls that make noises can induce a dog to play. Stuffed puzzle toys, where the dog has to retrieve a smaller squeaking toy hidden inside a larger toy, engage their innate hunting urges. If a dog is going to chew—and let's face it, most of them do—providing them with a safe alternative while they're at home alone will make both dog and owner satisfied.

Since dogs "thrive on novelty," Shusterich advises dog owners to keep at least 20 toys on hand. They can leave 15 toys out at one time to keep the dog occupied and rotate out five of the toys each week. That way, the dog never gets bored of seeing the same toys for too long.

with their dog before they leave. After a good workout, the dog will be tired, content and more likely to sleep at least a few hours while their owner is away.

With younger dogs, Marshall also advocates that someone, either the dog owner or a pet sitter, come in halfway through the day around lunchtime to check in. This affords a great opportunity to let the dog move around and play, exhausting them so that they are more likely to nap in the afternoon.

DOGGY-PROOFING THE HOME

"Puppies are like mouths on four paws: They've got to constantly explore," asserts Shusterich. Dog owners have a responsibility to protect their dogs from everyday hazards in the home, like live wires

they could chew into and shock themselves. Anything valuable or sentimental should be picked up off the floor and kept on a higher surface, out of a pup's reach. As Marshall puts it, "When you have a young dog, it's like having a toddler around, and you want to try to prevent as many problems as you possibly can."

THE DISTRACTION OF SHINY THINGS

One of the best ways to reduce separation anxiety and loneliness is to distract a dog and redirect their energy with "toys that engage dogs mentally as well as exercise them physically," declares Shusterich. Many of the most entertaining toys are stuffed with treats, so they combine the element of play with the reward of food. The dog has to figure

WILL WORK FOR FOOD

Even breakfast can become an adventure and be used to the pet owner's advantage when a dog is home alone. "Instead of feeding a dog breakfast in a bowl," Marshall suggests owners, "make up a frozen KONG, and with some of the dog's kibble in there, along with some canned food, and freeze it and then give that to their dog before they leave." That way, a dog can feel engaged and rewarded anywhere from 30 to 45 minutes just by working to get their morning meal.

PUPPY CAMS AND BIG BROTHER

A lot of cameras are geared toward decreasing separation anxiety (for both dog and owner). The owner can watch the dog in real-time to see how they handle being alone over

the course of the day. This video footage will also reveal any major problem behaviors that may need to be addressed with a professional trainer. Additionally, the camera

and napping. Its real value lies in reassuring the dog owner that everything is alright. For example, if a dog owner hires a pet sitter for some extra help during the day, the

Dogs can be distracted by toys that glow, games that make them think and complex puzzles that dispense treats.

technology often includes the ability to talk to the dog and reward them with treats, either randomly or when activated by the dog owner. Basically, "you're interacting with your dog without even having to be there," Marshall says.

Most of the video footage will be boring, showing dogs lying around

puppy cam enables them to "see how the pet sitter's interacting with [their] dog," claims Marshall, which will put their mind at ease. Also in the event of an emergency, many modern puppy cameras can send lifesaving warnings, so that owners can act quickly to protect their furry family member.





A QUIET HOMECOMING

Dogs take their cues from their humans. If dogs becomes emotionally worked-up over their owners' departure or return, the best way to handle it is to not make a big fuss. After all, as Shusterich points out, "any behavior that's reinforced or rewarded is going to be increased," and attention is one of the greatest rewards there is.

Instead of entering with great excitement and petting and praising the dog right away, Marshall recommends that dog owners practice "low-key" leaving and entering. Of course, the dog will be happy to see them, but if the owner treats their exits and entrances as normal, their dog will eventually calm down and stop feeling such intense separation anxiety. Essentially, the dog will become used to their owner leaving—as long as they always return home again. 🐾

FUN AND GAMES

Pup Entertainment

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|  <p>TREAT STUFFERS</p> <p>KONG Wobbler Dog Toy</p> <p>Shaped like the body of a snowman with three balls stacked one on top of the other, the KONG is a treat-dispensing toy. The dog nudges the KONG, making it tilt and spin and release the treats inside. You can freeze the KONG to increase difficulty and keep dogs engaged. \$17, kongcompany.com</p> |  <p>NOISEMAKER BALLS</p> <p>Wobble Wag Giggle Ball</p> <p>Dogs of all sizes love this durable ball with six different clutch pockets that make it easy to pick up. When shaken or rolled, the Giggle Ball emits playful, laughter-like sounds that perk up a dog's curiosity. A word of warning: For safety, buy the hard plastic version. \$14.99, wobblewaggiggle.com</p> |  <p>STUFFED PUZZLE TOYS</p> <p>Hide-a-Bee</p> <p>Three squeaky bees are hiding somewhere in a plush bee hive, and the dog has to find them. This quality puzzle toy activates dogs' curiosity and forces them to use their problem-solving skills to find the many places where those cute little fliers might be lurking. Treats can be hidden inside, too. \$16, outwardhound.com</p> |  <p>PUPPY CAMS</p> <p>Furbo Dog Camera</p> <p>Welcome to the secret lives of dogs. With this device, not only can pet owners live-stream video of what their canine friend is doing, but they will also be alerted if their pup starts barking or if someone enters the room. Pet owners can also talk to their dogs through the device to soothe them—and also dispense treats. \$199, furbo.com</p> |
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