

Canine separation-related problems: Part 4: first steps in resolving owner absent problems

'Canine separation-related problems' cover a range of behavioural presentations that occur while a dog is separated from its carer. These problems can result from activity in an array of emotional networks and can be motivated by various factors within the dog's environment and social relationships. Given the broad range of factors that are associated with separation-related problems, assisting carers in supporting their dogs as they develop the capacity to cope during carer absence can be complex, exhausting and time consuming for both the rehabilitation team and carer. Yet, supporting carers as they create an underlying sense of safety for their dog is a common requirement that is critical to all rehabilitation plans. For some dogs, an improved sense of coping and safety may be all that is required to enable the dog to progress to spending time independently of their owner.

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In order for a treatment plan for separation-related problems to be successful, it needs to be specific to the individual dog. Treatment plans must take into account factors including, but not limited to:

- What occurs during owner absence
- What initiated and what is maintaining the problem
- The learning that has occurred around the state of owner absence
- The dog's underlying emotional states
- The relative emergency of the situation at the time of presentation
- The owner's capacity to continue to cope with the dog and to be compliant with a treatment plan.

Separation-related problems can be extremely complex. Despite the relative complexity of the requirements for any treatment plan, it is always important that it remains as simple as possible to encourage owner compliance. Large numbers of dogs experience separation-related problems (often unnoticed because their responses remain passive and inhibited), and many will experience relinquishment or abandonment because owners fail to cope with the resultant welfare impact on their own lives. Yet, ensuring that a dog feels safe in its environment, and secure in its relationship with its owner, can make a substantial difference to a dog's capacity to cope during owner absence.

The size and significance of the welfare problem

Studies have found that 22–55% of the domestic dog population display behaviours that are problematic for their owners during owner absence (Bradshaw et al, 2002; Mills and Mills, 2003; Marques Soares et al, 2010). However, the fact that the dog's response has to be sufficiently obvious and troublesome for an owner for it to be reported suggests that the percentage of dogs that experience separation-related problems during owner absence could be considerably higher (Casey, 2022). This can be explained by the fact that dogs display only subtle signs of distress when owners prepare to leave the home or during owner absence. These signs include inactivity, tension in the brow and other facial muscles and between the ears. As such, many owners will be unaware that their dog is failing to cope at such times. However, for more obvious responders to owner absence, there is an inevitable reduction in the strength of the human-animal bond and an increased likelihood of relinquishment or euthanasia as a result of the negative impact of separation-related problems on owners.

Factors involved in separation-related problems

There are a proportion of dogs that cause damage within a home as a result of experiencing owner absence as an opportunity to en-

gage in behaviours, such as scavenging or rumbustious play with another family dog. These behaviours would be either prevented or rapidly interrupted when an owner is present. In addition, there will be occasions when some periods of owner absence temporarily exceed their dog's capacity to, for example, retain urine or faeces, resulting in house soiling. Alternatively, when a dog becomes restless and in need of mental stimulation, it may result in investigative behaviours that lead to household damage. Although such behaviours occur during owner absence, the author has not included them in *Table 1*, which provides an indication of the range of other factors that can negatively impact a dog and may result in a separation-related problem.

The role of coping and safety

With the exception of increased opportunities for otherwise inhibited behaviours, there is general agreement that disruption to a dog's sense of coping and safety is a basic requirement for a separation-related problem, and is a factor in predisposing a dog to the condition, as well as maintaining it. Consequently, the development of separation-related problems can be markedly reduced by (Appleby and Pluijmakers, 2003):

- Prioritising the dog's capacity to feel safe as it prepares for the complexity of the domestic environment
- Assisting the dog in building and maintaining its sense of safety within environments both inside and outside its home
- Ensuring that the dog experiences a sense of safety and consistency regarding its relationship with its owner
- Supporting the dog in building a concept of safety during owner departure and absence.

In addition, for many dogs, ensuring that those who are already exhibiting separation-related behaviours can access an environment with strong associations with safety is a major requirement for the resolution of separation-related problems (Mills, 2020).

Preventative strategies – preventing a failure to cope

Distress during owner absence can develop at any stage in a dog's life; however, some factors are highly likely to predispose a dog to such problems. Since a response to separation in the young of a social species is normal (Mills et al, 2013; Danenberg, 2021), it would be expected that the distress response upon separation (primarily from the dam) would decline as young animals learn independence (Appleby and Pluijmakers, 2003). However, this can only occur if owners set early and realistic expectations regarding owner availability (Heath, 2023). Hence, dogs that do not receive an opportunity to learn that being alone is a normal part of life will be predisposed to separation-related behaviours. However, failure to cope may be predisposed and established early in a puppy's development.

Despite the veterinary community's attempts to educate prospective puppy purchasers, owners continue to purchase puppies from breeders who fail to prioritise the emotional welfare of dogs by:

- Breeding from dogs and bitches that exhibit behaviours suggesting a reduced level of competency within complex and changing environments, potentially resulting in inherited genetic traits that enhance failure to cope
- Maintaining pregnant bitches in environments that fail to

promote a sense of coping and safety, therefore potentially exposing developing puppies to early neurological changes that reduce future neural plasticity and coping

- Failing to provide early environments for the dam and pups that enhance choice and stimulation
- Failing to safely manage the puppies' learning about safe periods of separation from the dam
- Failing to expose puppies to environmental and social stimuli that sufficiently approximate the complexity of domestic life.

Hence, the wealth of a puppy's experience prior to joining a home can be highly predictive of future competency and resilience when meeting the challenge of spending short periods of time in a state of social isolation (Hargrave, 2018a; 2018b).

Enhancing a puppy's capacity to cope within its new home

Although the puppy owner's responsibility for the emotional welfare of their dog begins with the selection of a breeder, every owner becomes fully responsible for the emotional development of their puppy once it joins their home. The sensitivity that is required during the gradual introduction of not only the home environment, but also the environment outside the home is often misunderstood. Many owners understand that during the period immediately following the puppy's 8th week, the puppy is increasingly sensitive to novel encounters. However, few owners appreciate that the puppy will also be sensitive to stimuli that have been previously experienced, but that are re-presented differently (eg volume, context or speed of presentation). The period before a puppy is 9 months old is one of considerable sensitivity, so if the puppy is to be expected to view its surroundings within a positive context, it is essential that competency skills continue to be gradually built up and practised during this period (Heath, 2023). This should occur while also helping the puppy remain within its capacity to cope without entering emotional states of negative valency.

The ability to cope with increasing periods of solitude is essential to this period of learning, and owners should ensure that management strategies also allow the puppy to remain relaxed and provide for the puppy's natural need to toilet, chew and explore (Danenberg, 2021). As such, the manner in which the owners of a puppy design their strategies for supporting the puppy's introduction to their home will depend on their puppy's previous experience, level of neural plasticity and capacity for time spent independently. Therefore, successful design and application of a programme will require substantial knowledge of canine emotional welfare or prior liaison with the veterinary team. This will ensure that adequate consideration is given to the puppy's signalment and the gradual implementation of periods of solitude that remain within the individual puppy's capacity to cope without experiencing distress.

In addition, owners need to recognise their puppy's high requirement for rest and sleep. Although puppies should not be left without an opportunity for enrichment of their environment, the nature of the activity should be selected to enhance the desired response from a puppy – for example, soothing licking or mouthing activities may better enhance restful periods than 'active' toys. In addition, owners should recognise that

Table 1. Factors that can result in a dog experiencing difficulty in coping during owner absence (Hargrave, 2018a; 2018b)

Potential initiating factors	Potential maintaining factors
Young animals with attachment problems associated with the dam and breeding environment (including early weaning)	Animal may never have developed the necessary competency for time spent in social isolation
Pups retained with the dam post puberty (eg single pups retained by owners following a family dog's misalliance)	
Dog of any age whose owners have always been present or who have not adequately prepared the dog for periods of social isolation	
Genuine over-attachment or reliance on owner presence	Continuous meeting of the dog's need for mental stimulation via human attention and interaction
Rescued or re-homed dogs	Constant expectation of loss of a secure social base and loss of secure access to resources
'Lap-dog' breeds, especially those that maintain neotenus features	Neotenus appearance retained into adulthood and attracting increased human attention and caring
Adolescent and mature dogs experiencing inconsistencies in owner-dog relationship	Lack of security and consistency in relationships disturbing coping
Dogs experiencing changes in routine regarding access to owners	School holidays, maternity or long-term sickness leave, shift alterations – periods of sustained owner access that can disturb independence
Underlying health problems	Learning and discomfort or pain associated with acute or chronic conditions – discomfort being more obvious when exposed to reduced levels of stimulation associated with family activity
Loss of secure social base because of bereavement, change in human social structure (eg children leaving home, adult separations)	Lack of access to a secure social relationship
Loss of the secure environmental base as a result of house move, holiday or kennel environment	Lack of predictable access to resources that have previously enhanced welfare
Lack of resilience to the domestic environment	Sound sensitivity, increase in the intensity of social activity in a home
Confinement distress	The need to use items to prevent destructive behaviours (eg a crate)
Frustration-related responses to external stimuli resulting in destruction or soiling	Over-exposure to stimuli which may include continuous exposure to passing pedestrians, delivery personal etc
Social frustration	Fear in response to barking dogs, noisy neighbours or pedestrians
Learnt anxiety or fear-related responses to sounds (eg because of previous exposure to aversive sounds during owner absence, such as fireworks, building works, road works, fire alarms or emergency vehicles)	Lack of alternative stimulation during owner absence enhancing focus on auditory and visual stimuli based outside the home
Learnt anxiety or fear responses as a result of trauma during owner absence (eg following exposure to a burglary, inappropriate care provision, physical injury)	An event which occurred during owner absence, creating an expectation of re-occurrence while owners are absent
Age-related changes in cognition and coping, causing increased reliance on owner proximity	Gradual development of cognitive and physical changes
Predatory-related destruction (eg because of rodent or squirrel activity in cavity walls or attic)	Recurring opportunity for predatory activity (eg scratching or digging) while owners are absent and unable to interrupt
Fear of punishment on the owner's return because of learning associated with previous owner behaviour in response to previous separation-related behaviours such as soiling and destruction	Increasing distress as the time of owner return is predicted
<i>Please note that this list is not exhaustive and factors may be cumulative.</i>	

puppies need to have frequent toileting opportunities and that they have a requirement to investigate and chew items, so periods of separation should be gradually built up. This includes night-time separations. It is no longer considered appropriate

to leave a puppy overnight to vocalise distress; such distress is likely to be detrimental to the puppy's developing sense of safety and may result in neurological damage that will result in reduced coping in a range of situations (Heath, 2023). In-

stead, owners should either remain with newly arrived puppies or bring their crates to the owner's bedroom. Following this, movement to the desired sleeping arrangement should be gradual and remain within the puppy's capacity to remain relaxed.

Managing the onset of anxiety and fear during owner absence

The early strategies mentioned are intended to provide the puppy with a concept of safety and coping while becoming socially independent within a wide range of social and environmental contexts (Appleby and Pluijmakers, 2003). This will reduce the likelihood of the development of anxiety or fear within those situations. The wider the dog's experience of habituation to stimuli (both inside and outside the home), the less likely that the dog will find itself exposed to scenarios that create or predict a lack of coping. However, owners may lack an understanding that regular revision of these competencies is required. COVID-19 lockdowns provided an excellent opportunity for the veterinary profession to realise how quickly dogs can lose previous competencies if access to a rich and diverse social and physical environment is denied, even for relatively short periods.

Of course, not all dogs enter a home as puppies; older dogs that join families (for example following relinquishment from another home) will be particularly vulnerable to owner absence-related problems. They will likely have had little or no preparation for their new environment and may have spent a period of time in an environment that inadvertently predisposes to loss of environmental resilience, such as after protracted periods within a rescue environment. These dogs will require considerable sensitivity from owners as they are prepared for periods of social isolation within their new home.

Creating a concept of safety within the home

Dogs need to feel safe (Mills, 2020) and part of their mechanism for maintaining a sense of coping and safety is being able to access a safe haven. Many dogs will have already indicated to owners the type of characteristics that they are seeking from a safe haven or den, by heading for their own 'bolt hole' when they are startled by sudden changes in their social and physical environment. This is often somewhere relatively small, dark and preferably protected from noise (such as a cupboard, small room or underneath an item of furniture).

However, a safe haven is not the same as a bolt hole (Manteca et al, 2016) or place of previous social isolation following negative incidents. A bolt hole is a place to which a dog heads in the hope that it will feel safer; it will already have learnt that the environment is a place that is accessed while it is already in a state of distress. If the distress continues, then the bolt hole is not working (hence frustration may be added to any emotion of anxiety or fear). A place of safety is a place where the dog always feels that it can cope, that it is safe and has autonomy. As such, a bed or crate to which a dog is occasionally sent if the family consider its behaviour to be socially inappropriate, is not a 'safe' place. If a puppy or rehomed dog joins a new home, then families can ensure that they select a place for the main bed:

- That is always accessible
- That is never closed
- That is in a quiet area, where family members do not have to walk past it or towards it to gain access to another area of the home
- That has a covered roof and sides (this is not the same as a towel or folded blanket on the top!) – the covering should be thick enough to provide adequate sound-proofing from household activity.

To enhance the dog's sense of control, the dog should never be led, forced or lured into its safe place. However, when the dog approaches the safe place, it should find some tasty treats within, and as it becomes more likely to enter the area, then small treats can be swapped for longer lasting items (such as a stuffed Kong or a chew), that will encourage the dog to relax in the area. If a dog is in its safe place, it should not be encouraged to come out – it is there for a reason; this means that if it is time for a walk and the dog has not volunteered to exit its den, owners should accept that the dog is clearly indicating that it does not wish to go for a walk. Ultimately, a safe haven should mean 'no harm will ever come to me [the dog] while I am [it is] in here' (Mills, 2020).

Creating an appropriate relationship between owner and dog

Human psychologists have identified that parents who are not sensitive to their child's needs, discourage autonomy and act in an unpredictable manner towards the child (for example sometimes providing attention and sometimes not), are likely to predispose their child to attachment and separation problems (Danenberg, 2021). Therefore, it is now considered that helping a dog to develop emotional stability and a degree of autonomy is essential to its welfare and the avoidance of separation-related problems.

As dogs are social obligates (Heath, 2023), building a sense of coping and safety includes creating a safe, secure and predictable relationship with other social stimuli – most importantly, with the owner (Mills, 2020). An important part of any relationship is communication, and the owner of any dog should be skilled in interpreting their dog's attempts to communicate its capacity to cope within an environment. The owner should be ready to respond by assisting their dog to gain access to an environment that poses fewer challenges to its sense of safety. In addition, owners need to be accomplished trainers, enabling their dogs to feel confident in following their behavioural guidance, even in challenging situations. Building such communication requires an understanding that such training requires:

- Time – but in small increments that remain within the dog's capacity to cope and concentrate (hence multiple short periods, per day (for example while a kettle boils) are far more useful than a single, prolonged session)
- Patience – a willingness to accept that a dog's inability to comply is most likely because of an owner's expectations are exceeding the dog's capacity to cope within the environment
- Reward – a willingness to instantly 'mark' an acceptable behaviour with something that is likely to reinforce the behaviour to increase the likelihood of the dog repeating it.

A puppy should develop a capacity for coping with isolation through sensitive and gradual introductions of short period of social isolation. However, not all adult dogs will have received such

opportunities; as they are introduced to periods of owner absence, such dogs will require the same degree of patience, and possibly greater, as would be expected in puppy training.

Owner understanding of the inappropriateness of the use of punishment is also essential to the sense of predictability, safety and security that a dog experiences within the owner–dog relationship. A surprising proportion of owners still fail to understand that their pet has no concept of ‘right or wrong’, assuming that separation-related behaviours that are inconvenient to owners are motivated by emotions such as spite and a conscious intention to ‘get back’ at the owner for leaving the dog. Additionally, a considerable number of owners fail to understand that punishment does not have to be physical, but that raised and emotional voices, tense body language and aversive behaviour such as pulling a dog out of a soiled environment, will severely disrupt the dog’s sense of safety within the mutual relationship, increase distress and result in long-term learning that is disruptive both to the owner–dog relationship as well as to the dog’s future capacity to cope. If a dog is going to be confident and secure in its capacity to cope while alone, relationships with humans must be non-confrontational (Heath, 2023).

If a dog is showing high levels of social panic during owner absence, it is less likely to be hyper-attached to its owner. However, it is more likely that the owner’s caregiving style is not resulting in the dog experiencing a secure attachment (Mills, 2020). In such cases, the owner’s primary focus should be to build the relationship with the dog, creating consistent interactions that ensure the dog gains the attention that it requires. By ensuring that attention and short periods of training are regularly combined, the dog learns that the relationship is positive, predictable and rewarding, while also improving its capacity to co-operate with the owner’s requirements. At times when the owner is unable to provide this resource, then an alternative resource that the dog would consider equally beneficial should be provided. The dog needs to trust the owner and learn that the owner will never cause it harm; if this can be achieved, then problems associated with separation may naturally resolve.

It is well accepted that dogs form an attachment bond with their owners. For dogs that seem unable to settle, even if their owner has merely stepped into another room or if the owner–dog bond has in some manner been disrupted, it is not necessarily the case that the dog is following the owner because of an excessive need for their attention. It may be that the dog cannot access their normal, natural social need for attention as this need is not being met or maintained by the owner – the owner is inattentive to the dog’s social requirement of social contact (Mills, 2020). Recognising this could enable a rebuilding of better relationships with the animal. However, the frequently proffered advice to reduce attention to the animal could cause further detriment to the emotional welfare of the dogs and result in an intensification of separation-related behaviours. Hence, adequate time is required for the assessment of the nature of the relationship that exists between the dog and their owner.

Owner availability and separation-related problems

It is now recognised that the resolution to separation-related problems is not limited to owner availability (Heath, 2023), but involves the nature of that availability, the dog’s reliance on the

owner and its sense of safety. If the dog can build up confidence in its ability to gain what it requires from the environment and feel secure and confident during owner absence, then separation-related problems are unlikely to occur. However, if the dog is frequently seeking information about owner responses to their environment through behaviours such as leaning, pawing, nudging, sniffing and licking, then coping while such information is unavailable will be impaired. Hence, assessment of a dog’s reliance on the owner for such information gathering is an important step in developing a behaviour modification plan that will enhance coping during owner absence. Owners of dogs exhibiting such information gathering behaviours may have previously been advised to either ignore or re-buff their dog’s attentions, but such responses of rejection may further a dog’s distress and lack of competence. In addition, it may initiate a burst of aggression in a highly frustrated dog (Mills, 2020). Hence, the common advice of telling an owner to ignore their dog following return to a home may do further harm to the relationship. The dog needs to be with the owner but, if turned away, the dog will perceive the owner to be even more inconsistent in their caregiving. Instead, such dogs should receive a calm and positive response that delivers sufficient information to reduce the dog’s level of uncertainty, before offering the dog a positive alternative to its behaviour.

The role of environmental enrichment

A consistent relationship that provides for a dog’s welfare needs must cater for both the dog’s social and environmental enrichment needs. Environmental enrichment reduces anxiety by increasing serotonin and endorphin levels (Manteca et al, 2016) and encourages a positive emotional valence through use of the dog’s ‘seeking’ emotional system (Heath, 2023). Providing opportunities to engage in environmental investigation and puzzle-solving activity throughout the dog’s day will enhance the dog’s engaging emotions (through the emotions of ‘seeking’ and ‘play’) and enhance learning about independent investigation of the environment without the requirement for owner proximity. However, attempts to leave a dog to enjoy enrichment activities may have to be very gradual. For some dogs, this may mean that a starting point requires the dog to be fully relaxed and engaged with a tasty puzzle feeding exercise while the owner merely approximates adjusting their weight as though about to rise from a chair, and it could take weeks before the owner can stand and take a few steps from a resting area. Other dogs may be content to continue engaging with an activity while an owner moves around the home. Each dog is an individual and owners will need to carefully observe subtle communication regarding their dog’s capacity to cope and progress, while aiming to never exceed their dog’s capacity to remain relaxed. It is for this reason that many owners become despondent when they attempt to apply programmes that are too prescriptive regarding expectations of owner distance or periods of absence; owners must be ready to slowly build up their dog’s capacity to feel that it can remain in control of its capacity to cope.

Conclusions

Owners are likely to define their dog’s separation-related problem in terms of the difficulties that the condition causes for the owner.

Yet, separation-related problems occur because the context surrounding the separation of is disruptive to the dog's capacity to cope. The external stimuli that result in a dog failing to cope and influencing the dog's emotional state, may fluctuate throughout an owner's absence from their dog and as the separation-related problem develops. However, there is a need to enhance a dog's mood during periods of separation from owners by ensuring that they have a sense of coping, safety and control over their direct environment. By careful assessment of the dog's emotional stability during its daily activities, and importantly, while with their caregiver, many dogs experiencing separation-related problems can benefit from strategies that are developed to support the owner-dog bond and that enable the dog to achieve a better sense of safety during owner absence. **CA**

Helpful sources of information for veterinary professionals

- Fellowship of Animal Behaviour Clinicians: Find a Behaviourist | FAB Clinicians, Handouts | FAB Clinicians and Veterinary Q and A Sessions | FAB Clinicians
- Register of Certificated Clinical Animal Behaviourists (CCAB Certification Ltd): CCAB Certification | How to become a CCAB
- Lincoln University's Canine Anxiety Scale: The Lincoln Canine Anxiety Scale (LCAS) available from IP Store
- Reconcile: Free Veterinary Webinars: Reconcile free e-learning series on separation disorder for dogs presented by Dr Sarah Heath, the UK's leading veterinary behavioural specialist (fortehealthcare.com)

Helpful sources of information for clients

- Battersea: Dealing With Stress And Separation Anxiety in Dogs | Battersea
- Dogs Trust: Separation Anxiety In Dogs | Behaviour | Dogs Trust
- PDSA: Separation anxiety in dogs - PDSA
- RSPCA: Separation Anxiety in Dogs | RSPCA

Conflict of interest

The author declares that there are no conflicts of interest.

KEY POINTS

- The proportion of dogs experiencing separation-related problems is likely to be in excess of 55% of the canine population.
- Early developmental factors can be highly significant to a dog's capacity to cope during owner absence – this is a breeder's responsibility.
- The provision and nature of early opportunities for separation from owners is essential to preventing separation-related problems.
- Every dog requires a 'safe place' that enhances a sense of coping, control and autonomy.
- The stability and nature of the relationship between owner and dog can hugely influence whether a dog develops separation-related problems.

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