



Shippensburg Animal Hospital, PC

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Nine Tips for Dog Behavior Modification

The following tips outline behavior modification techniques:

Tip 1: To Crate or Not to Crate

The most effective treatment for separation anxiety involves behavior modification. Many dogs respond well to confinement in a small space because it makes them feel secure. If a dog enjoys crate or room confinement, as shown by sleeping or snacking while confined, owners should use this technique both when they are at home as well as when they are absent. Remember the crate or “safe room” is an area where the dog feels safe and content; never use the crate or “safe room” as punishment. Some dogs panic when confined or crated. If a dog panics when confined, crating should not be forced or the dog’s behavior will worsen. If the dog damages his body during confinement, confinement is no longer an option. If a dog is to be confined to a small room, the owners should “dog-proof” the room. This entails making sure the dog has no access to dangling electric cords or outlets. Suitable bedding, water, and toys should be provided. It is a good idea to remove collars and harnesses. Anything that can be destroyed should be removed. If a dog becomes destructive, the process of destroying becomes self-perpetuating. This applies to destroying objects as well as damaging the dog’s own body.

When the dog is confined, it may be helpful to set a light on a timer to go on 15-20 minutes before the owner returns. This acts as a signal to the dog that the owner is returning. The signal must be taught to the dog. First, put the dog in its confined area and set the timer so the light comes on a short time later. After the dog is relaxed, the owner should leave the area and reenter when they know that the light will be coming on. This signal makes the dog anticipate the owner’s return. This technique only works with set schedules. You would never want the light to come on and the owner not to return within 15-20 minutes.

Tip 2: Avoid Rewarding Anxious Behaviors with Attention

It is very natural when your dog is anxious or upset to try to reassure your pet. By reassuring your nervous pet, you are actually reinforcing their fear and anxiety with your voice, your words, and your attention. Owners must try to reward their pet for being relaxed at any time. The more that they are relaxed and their behavior rewarded the more these relaxed behaviors are generalized into everyday life. All family members need to help reward these relaxed behaviors.

It is also helpful to teach behaviors that help the dog to relax. The dog should learn ‘sit’ and ‘stay’ behaviors and be rewarded with food. These behaviors can be requested often leading to praise and reward only when the dog has sat, stayed, and shown a relaxed appearance. As the dog more reliably relaxes as soon as it sits, this behavior could be asked during anxiety

producing situations. At first, start by asking for the 'sit', 'stay' before meals, before giving any treats, before any petting, before grooming, before putting a leash and collar on, before taking walks, before inviting your pet onto furniture, before playing games or with toys, and before any special occasions. (If an older dog can not sit comfortably, ask for a down.) The dog should be sitting next to you. Get the dog to reliably sit when asked before asking for a 'sit' during an anxious time.

Tip 3: Teaching Dogs Not to be Anxious When Alone

This tip takes tip #2 further. Once the dog is performing the sit stay well, and is relaxed while the owner stands next to the dog, the owner needs to gradually move away from the dog. The dog should sit, stay, and relax. The owner should walk 2 steps away from the dog, wait for the dog to continue to relax, return, praise and give a treat. The owner should continue in this manner, taking more and more steps away from the dog and praising the relaxed behaviors. This should continue until the owner can leave the room.

Success is dependent on the owner proceeding slowly, learning to recognize relaxed behavior and rewarding these behaviors only. When the dog is not successful, the owner should not punish the dog just remain silent when the dog is anxious. The dog needs to be able to sit, stay, and relax in each room of the house and outdoors without any anxiety. Then the owner can increase the time the dog is left alone.

Tip #4: Establishing Regular Visitation

The best thing for dogs with separation anxiety would be learning relaxation techniques for when left at home. Some dogs only react to one person's actual departure (not separation). For these dogs, going to work or on errands would solve the problem. This is not often possible. Another option is hiring a pet-sitter or placing the dog in "doggie day care" (where available). If these are not options, asking a friend or neighbor to visit the dog can alleviate a dog's anxiety level.

Tip 5: Allowing the Dog to View the World

Some dogs will be less anxious if they can see the outdoors. This may mean moving their crate close to a window or pulling aside window dressings. Owners should take care on hot days to provide a way for confined animals to escape the heat generated near the windows. Some dogs may do better in an outdoor, roofed run. The run should be roofed securely to prevent the dog from climbing out if it becomes stressed. Dogs with storm phobia should not be kenneled outdoors.

Tip # 6: Identifying Cues that May Alert the Dog that the Owner is Leaving

Dogs read our body language quite well. Dogs pick up on our cues and patterns that indicate we are about to depart. Owners need to desensitize their dogs to these cues so that the cues no longer elicit the anxiety. Every person will have different patterns and cues. Owners need to pay attention to their own patterns of behaviors prior to departure. For example, owners that get up at 6 am, shower, eat breakfast, do their make-up and pick up their briefcase and keys before leaving should perform these acts and stay home. Grab a gym bag, if you normally do before leaving,

and take it to the kitchen to make dinner. Also desensitize cues that signal owners are staying home. If you only wear jeans on Saturday when you are home all day, leave during the weekday with jeans on and change at work.

Tip #7: Looking for Signs of Distress

Dogs that become distressed after owners leave are usually distressed before they leave. Owners need to learn to recognize the signs of distress: panting, pacing, whining, trembling, digging, failing to eat, ears tucked down and back; all these indicate stress. Owners can not reward these behaviors by saying “You’re okay!” Before the dog becomes distressed, owners should calm behavior by talking to the dog, massaging it or grooming. If the dog still becomes upset when the owner leaves, they must ignore the behavior and not fuss over the dog. Fussing or sympathizing unintentionally rewards the anxious behavior.

Tip #8: Avoid Punishment as a Treatment Measure

Dogs can not learn when they are punished after the fact for destructive or excessive behavior. Punishing an already anxious dog makes matters worse. If there is damage or soiled area, it should be cleaned quickly and quietly.

Tip #9: Consider Anti-anxiety Medication

After discussing your dog’s scenario with your veterinarian, you may be advised to start with only behavior modification. If this is not successful enough, your veterinarian may also advise anti-anxiety medication. Prior to starting medication, a complete physical, chemistry profile, and complete blood count should be performed. Your veterinarian will discuss possible side effects, duration of treatment, and costs. There is no magic pill that will stop separation anxiety. All family members must be willing to help with behavior modification. Medication may just facilitate the success of behavior modification.