

Home Alone? Basic Time Management for Your Dog

© 1999 - Humane Education Committee, Champaign County Humane Society

When was the last time you heard someone say, "I have more time on my hands than I know what to do with?" Probably never. Practically no one feels there are enough hours in the day. To make sure the dog gets his or her due, conscientious dog owners schedule time for walking and feeding the dog, training and playing games, and possibly also participating in organized dog sports, such as tracking, flyball, agility, or obedience. But how much thought do we give to how the dog spends the rest of her day, especially those portions of it when we are absent?

In the process of domestication, we've taken a species that is among the most intensely social in the animal kingdom and required them to spend much of their time alone. In late 20th-century American society, social isolation is an inescapable fact of existence for our canine companions. These hours spent away from the pack are stressful under the best of circumstances, and potentially damaging given the wrong conditions. As behaviorist and educator Linda Case explains in her recent book, *The Dog: Its Behavior, Nutrition, and Health*, separation stress frequently manifests itself in hyperactivity, destructive behaviors, and excessive vocalization. How can we minimize the negative aspects of this social deprivation and prevent the development of behavior problems?

Regular vigorous exercise and mental stimulation, adequate socialization, and interactive play are all part of a necessary daily routine for a well-adjusted dog. Proper confinement in your absence is another crucial, and frequently overlooked, aspect of dog care. Behaviorists, dog trainers, and veterinarians report that problems often develop in owner-absent dogs who are confined improperly, particularly those left in a dog crate for excessive periods of time or outside in the owner's yard. What types of problems arise under these conditions of confinement? How can we create an environment conducive to our dog's well-being?

Alone in the yard, the dog acutely experiences social deprivation and will bark, dig and chew to regain access to the pack or to relieve her discomfort. Left outside, most dogs will develop a barking problem. They may bark from boredom and to communicate with the absent pack (attention-seeking barking). They may bark in response to external stimuli (excitable or alarm barking). They may bark because of physical need (for food or water) or frustration (since their access to animals or objects outside the fence is blocked), or to convey a threat (stay off my territory). Excessive barking is largely self-reinforcing and, once established, can be very difficult to ameliorate as long as the dog remains outside.

Many dogs will develop a digging habit when left unsupervised in the yard. Some breeds are more prone to digging behaviors than others (just as certain breeds are more likely to engage in alarm barking), but most dogs will eventually dig in response to a scent, to bury something, to be reunited with their pack, to conserve or disperse heat, or to entertain themselves. Digging can also be highly self-reinforcing and resistant to attempts at extinction.

Destructive chewing is another behavior problem that can develop in dogs left outside. Adult dogs chew mainly to relieve anxiety or boredom, or simply for enjoyment. Like barking and digging, chewing is a natural canine activity that we can anticipate and channel.

Obviously, if we are not present to intervene (i.e., substitute "legal" chew toys for inappropriate objects and offer praise for chewing the legal items), this behavior can result in destruction of property and serious harm to the dog, such as intestinal blockages or perforation.

A host of other problems are associated with outdoor confinement. Some dogs left alone outside will engage in self-mutilation (producing lick granulomas) to relieve their anxiety or boredom. The fence itself may intensify any underlying territorial aggression in susceptible dogs. The dog left outside may be subject to cruel or thoughtless behavior on the part of humans, with long-term behavioral consequences, or may be exposed to wild or stray animals, which can transmit parasites and disease. Outside dogs can develop storm phobias and are at risk of hypothermia and heatstroke. Some dogs left alone outside will learn to jump or scale the fence, or dig under it, or break through an electric fence, in order to relieve their distress or to pursue some external stimulus. Apart from the fact that running at large is prohibited by law, loose dogs are at great risk of injury.

Prevention of these problems by proper confinement indoors is far easier than modifying undesirable behavior after it has been established. Once you have taught your dog the "house rules," she will be continually practicing her indoor living skills in your absence, rather than developing bad habits outdoors. Until she has proven herself trustworthy indoors, you'll need to provide her with a safe place to wait out your absence, such as a crate or a dog-proofed confinement area. It is essential to provide chew toys to occupy her, such as Nylabones or one or more of the "sustained-release food devices" (sterilized hollow bones or Kong toys stuffed with peanut butter, nutritionally balanced soft treats, mashed potatoes, or cheese cubes, or a Buster Cube, Activity Ball, or Roll-a-Treat filled with kibble). Do not leave her unsupervised with rawhide bones or chips, toys with squeakers, or even a rope toy if she is likely to shred and ingest it. Just as a yard is not a substitute for regular walks and interactive play, a crate is not a substitute for teaching your dog to chew only authorized chew objects. Make sure she has a solid record of being praised for chewing on legal objects.

Once your dog has mastered house rules and enjoys free run of at least part of the house, you may want to modify the environment slightly to prevent excessive barking. Block your dog's view of the street (close the drapes) or block off his access to rooms with front windows. Confined or free, make sure your dog receives exercise and the opportunity to eliminate before you leave. A regular schedule of activities will offset or reduce the distress your dog experiences during periods of social isolation. Provide ample mental stimulation, social interaction, and physical exercise during your leisure hours. As behaviorist and trainer Jean Donaldson, author of *Culture Clash*, has observed, most dogs are seriously underchallenged in their daily lives and underexposed to the outside world. Incorporate your dog as much as possible into your activities. Play games such as fetch, frisbee, hide and seek, find it, and tug (assuming your dog has been taught to take and release the tug toy on command). Take your dog to a training class to socialize him to other dogs and build his confidence.

Ironically, the very device designed to provide safe confinement indoors, the dog crate, is sometimes used, or misused, so that it creates problems rather than aiding in preventing them. Dogs confined in crates for long periods of time can develop undesirable behaviors, and excessive crating often exacerbates any underlying behavior problems. Overuse of the crate can result in a dog that is hyperexcitable outside of the crate. Conversely, some dogs

that are crated too long become depressed. A preexisting problem such as aggression or timidity may intensify in response to the dog's frustration at being crated excessively. Used properly, however, a crate serves as your dog's den, providing security and comfort in your absence.

If you are confining your dog to a crate or a safe room until he learns the house rules, you or another family member should come home during the lunch hour if at all possible to provide social contact, fresh water, and the opportunity to eliminate. If this is not feasible, enlist the aid of a pet sitter, friend, or neighbor, at least initially. No dog should be crated throughout the day and again at night. As a rule of thumb, if you will be away for more than five or six hours at a time, your dog should be left in a confinement area (a dog-proofed room or portion of a room secured with barriers), rather than a crate. Puppies require special crating procedures [AAR has a separate puppy housetraining handout.]

Finally, be prepared to exercise your dog as soon as you arrive home. Whether he has been confined in your absence or has had free run of the house, you can't expect him to wait patiently after you get home from work while you put your feet up and read the paper. He has been coping with social deprivation all day and deserves your full attention as soon as you arrive. Of course you can't quit your job and put your life on hold to stay home with your dog, but with planning, preventative training, and proper confinement, you can make those unavoidable periods of social isolation much less stressful for him.