

Home Alone? How to Reduce Your Dog's Boredom!

Home Alone? When was the last time you said to yourself, "I have more time on my hands than I know what to do with?" Probably you've never have, but consider, your dog is often left home alone to determine how to spend their time.

While during your off time, you might participate in organized dog sports, agility, rally obedience, tracking, pet therapy or other activities, but how much thought have you given to the rest of your dog's day?

Separation stress frequently manifests itself in hyperactivity, destructive behaviors and excessive vocalization. Others develop separation anxiety, while others find "fun things" to entertain themselves when left home alone.

So, how can you minimize the negative aspects and prevent the development of behavior problems?

Regular *vigorous exercise with mental stimulation*, adequate socialization, and interactive play are necessary in a dog's daily routine for a well-adjusted dog. Proper confinement in your absence is crucial and frequently overlooked. Problems develop in owner-absent dogs who are confined improperly, particularly those left in a dog crate for excessive periods or outside in the owner's yard. Alone - they will bark, dig and chew or eliminate where inappropriate or undesirable.

Sadly excessive barking is largely "self-reinforcing" and once established is very difficult to eliminate as long as the dog remains outside or in the crate. Digging and chewing are other "activities" for the dog to relieve anxiety or boredom. However, digging, barking, chewing is a natural canine activity that we can anticipate and direct more appropriately.

Other problems associated with outdoor confinement—dogs may engage in excessive licking, develop fence fighting, exposure to wild or stray animals, they can develop phobias to storms, loud noises, cars or other things. Some outside dogs

will learn to jump or scale the fence and often times "break through" an electric fence.

Prevention by proper confinement indoors is far easier than modifying undesirable behaviors after establishment. Once you have taught the dog "house rules" they will continue practicing indoor living skills in your absence, rather than developing bad outdoor behaviors. However, until the dog has PROVEN himself or herself to be trustworthy indoors you will need to provide a safe place to wait out your absence.

Try a dog-proofed confinement area. Provide chew toys, Kong toys stuffed with goodies, Buster Cubes, Activity Balls, or Roll-a-Treat filled with kibble or "breakfast." Do not leave them unsupervised with rawhide bones, chips or toys with squeakers or even a rope toy if they are likely to ingest it. ***Just as a yard is not a substitute for regular activity or interactive play—a crate is not a substitute for teaching your dog to chew only authorized objects.***

Once your dog has mastered "house-rules," you may want to block your dog's view of the street to avoid excessive barking. Block off those rooms with front windows. A regular schedule of activities will offset or reduce the distress of your dog. **Provide ample mental stimulation, social interaction and physical exercise** during your "leisure hours." Sadly, most dogs are seriously under challenged in their daily lives and underexposed to the outside world.

- Take your dog to a training class - training does not always have to be "obedience!"
- Try Fun with Tricks, Danc'n with Dogs, Fido n' Me Fitness, Rally O, Outdoor Adventure or Real World classes - Challenge your dog's mind.
- Try day care for dogs - visit and observe to choose the best suited dog day care for your active dog.
- Consider hiring a dog walker or someone to allow the dog outside to potty if left for long periods.
- Finally be prepared to exercise your dog as soon as you arrive home.

If you must leave the dog outdoors while you are away for shorter periods—Create a Stimulating Environment: Dogs need mental stimulation and will create their own stimulation if we don't find ways to satisfy their needs. Often times their "ways" are very distressing to humans. Thus destructive is the "name of the game" for the dog.

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1. Create a stimulating environment or treasure hunt -- this requires a little pre-planning but it can be fun!
2. Create an "obstacle course" Hide treats inside various toys around the yard for them to seek and find for them to explore where they "find" the "goodies!"
3. *Hide food before leaving or use a BusterCube® - your dog will "work" for their meal.*
4. Hang objects, milk cartons, or toys from various trees (or tether ball poles, roofs, etc) - use a small amount of peanut butter to entice them to try gym for the first few times.
5. Stuff a KONG® with something delicious then freeze it - hide it!
6. Make a sand/dig box for them to dig - make it interesting - hide some treats!
7. Give him large indestructible toys for him to push around!
8. Fill a kids' wading pools to splash around in (*in the warmer months*) Leave a radio or television on; radio on classical or "oldies" and TV - the Animal Planet, or Discovery.
9. Play daily with higher intensity games like ball-fetch, tug-of-war or hide & seek before you leave - makes them tired and more likely to sleep some of the day.
10. If you work long hours, consider a dog-walker, or day-care for dogs.
11. Take a class - basic obedience, tricks or something to teach and keep your dog's mind active and learning.

Remember - never isolate or banish your dog to the backyard, room or crate - your dog will develop his "own games" often times destructiveness, excess barking or other unwanted behaviors become the name of the game.

Note: With any of these activities, games & toys a trial run is necessary - be sure your dog does not create a potentially hazardous situation for themselves through chewing and ingesting any of the objects when left alone.