



Preventing Separation Distress In Puppies While In Isolation

Practical strategies for overcoming the challenges of COVID-19 restrictions on new puppies.

LIBBY YOUNG

While getting a puppy now may seem like the perfect time, the current coronavirus restrictions pose a few very serious challenges, that, if not managed carefully could lead to a lifetime of distressing behaviour problems for your dog.

The main issues are lack of socialisation, both with humans (due to lack of visitors) and with other dogs, and the inability to attend puppy classes (which have all been cancelled Australia wide). While all these issues are important, the biggest concern is separation distress which develops very readily when a puppy has too much access to humans and therefore does not develop sufficient independence during its critical phase. With members of every family home almost all day at the moment (which is looking likely to continue to some degree for several months), we are certain to see an enormous spike in separation distress cases once life returns to normal. Separation distress is the number one behaviour problem we see in puppies that were acquired during school holidays, particularly Christmas holidays.

The critical phase for puppies is between 8-16 weeks. This is the time when a puppy's brain is developing at its most rapid rate, neuroplasticity is at its best and neural pathways are quickly forming. Within this time are micro periods that are very important and need to be considered for how and when we do early learning and socialisation. Between 7-9 weeks a puppy's brain is most open to accepting new and unusual things as normal. This is the perfect time to introduce a puppy to all the things that it will have to deal with in life including other species like cats, chickens, rabbits and other animals, lots of new and different kinds of people, new environments and situations, including periods alone.

By the time a puppy reaches 10-11 weeks they begin approaching what is referred to as the primary fear imprint phase which technically

starts at 12 weeks and is characterised by dogs suddenly behaving much more suspiciously towards anything new and odd that is presented to them. Dogs that have not been introduced to many novel things and situations between 7-10 weeks will be much more suspicious of, and often outright afraid of unusual or unfamiliar things. Similarly, by this age if a puppy has not developed sufficient independence it can be extremely difficult to suddenly introduce them to periods alone or restriction from you if not done earlier.



When your new (8 week old) puppy comes from the breeder, they have been constantly surrounded by littermates, their mother, and often other dogs as well. When they come home with you, they very quickly bond with their new human family and adjust to their new surroundings. However, as well as having never been alone prior to adoption, they learn very quickly that all good things come from being with people! All play, food, walks, social interaction, company in general, is dependent on humans so when you walk out the door to go anywhere, from your puppy's perspective, all the good things in life walk out the door with you leaving them isolated, bored and alone. If your puppy has access to you at all times when you are home, this will be exacerbated. The way to prevent this is to blur the lines between when you are home and when you are gone using periodic restriction from you when you are home, and leaving the house for periods right away.

In the first 48 hours of your puppy arriving home, we have an amazing opportunity to

introduce them to a new way of life while your puppy is in a kind of initial 'shock' due to the dramatic change of environment and your puppy is getting used to their new home. With them having left their littermates and everything they have known and suddenly arriving into your family, we can set things up so that you are bringing them into an already prepared management system so as to start them off on the right foot from day one.

Following are the best and most effective ways to do this and promote independence in your puppy even under these extraordinary circumstances.

TOP WAYS TO TRAIN INDEPENDENCE:

1. Work up to sleeping your puppy on its own

While there is no correlation between difficult behaviours and a dog sleeping in the bedroom (this was thrown out under scientific scrutiny many years ago), there are huge benefits to sleeping a new puppy on its own for the first few months to establish early independence. There may be times in life when you go away, or your puppy has to sleep at the vets and therefore will have to sleep away from you. If we establish their ability to do this early, you will have a very resilient dog. You may choose to allow them to sleep with you as a rule later on, but it is a good idea to keep a maintenance level of sleeping a night here and there outside of the bedroom so they retain the ability to do so when required, without experiencing stress. The best way to do this is right away, on the first night when your puppy is exhausted from the change of environment and first day in its new home. A laundry or ensuite bathroom with a baby gate or the door shut is ideal as it is big enough for you to have a pee pad or grass toilet far enough away from the bed for the puppy to comfortably use in the night if you do not wish to get up to toilet them. Of course if you have them in a crate you will need to take them out every two to three hours for toileting. Please be aware puppies are clean by nature and do not like to be trapped with the smell of urine

or faeces so some puppies may cry after they have been to the toilet. For this reason my personal preferred method is to take the puppy out every three hours even if they sleep in an area big enough to accommodate a pee pad or toilet. Once most puppies reach 12-14 weeks they can generally hold on up to 6 hours (meaning you can toilet them at 12pm then 6am).

PRO TIP

If you have a puppy that is experiencing distress sleeping alone the first night or two and is unable to settle, you can sleep them in a crate by the bed, reassuring them that you are near, and then slowly each night move them closer toward the door, and eventually outside of the door or into the ensuite or laundry. Often we find after they have spent a day or two in and out of their pen in the family area (and where they eat and sleep in the day) they will be happy to sleep there at night also.

2. Restriction from you

It is important to restrict your puppy's access to you on and off during the day. This should be done both in sight of humans (ie using a puppy pen or crate) and also where the puppy has no visual access to humans at all, and is unable to track peoples' movements around the house, for example a laundry or bathroom with the door closed or a baby gate, in their pen with people out of the room for extended periods, or outside if your yard is secure and it is safe to do so (please note your puppy must be conditioned to be happy in these areas first). Doing this also allows us to randomise routines throughout the day which is extremely important for our puppies... more on that later.

3. Deliberate leavings

From day one make sure everyone goes out at least once a day for between 1-3 hours, for your morning walk, trip to the shops or exercise without taking the puppy. You may take the puppy out on separate trips for exposure to the big wide world. Your puppy should be left in either the laundry, puppy pen or an area where they have access to a grass toilet or pee pad, if you are going for longer than 20 minutes.

4. Food Toys

Food toys are a way to give your puppy something enjoyable to do that is not dependent on human company. Food toys work with a dogs natural drive to scavenge and look for food, they activate the pleasure centres and the problem solving areas

of the brain whilst promoting serotonin, oxytocin and dopamine, all the feel good chemicals. Food toys are an excellent tool for initially conditioning your puppy to be happy in certain areas the first few times we introduce them to a space (pen, laundry, crate or outside). Once they are happy in these areas, however we must be conscious not to give them food toys only when we are leaving or confining them. Doing so will make food toys predictors of long periods restricted or alone, and your dog may start to become unhappy a the sight of the food toy. Rather, quickly move to using the food toys as a reward for your puppy relaxing, or for settling down after you have put them in their pen, crate or outside. This way we are rewarding them for calming down and not being overly focused on us. This further develops independence and emotional self regulation in you puppy. It also makes going into the pen or yard a predictor of something good happening for them. This will ensure we are using food toys as a reward rather than a lure/distraction to 'trick' your puppy into going into an area.

5. Randomise everything, mix things up, nothing should be predictable!

This is a little spoken about issue but is one of the most important in creating a resilient, stress free, flexible dog. When we examine the history and daily routines in the most severe separation distress cases, there is frequently a history of very predictable routines that the dog has become not only accustomed to but reliant upon for its security. When a change in family circumstances, daily routines, work situations or a person leaving the home causes a variation in the routines the dog is accustomed to, they are unable to cope. Fortunately, this is a very easy situation to avoid by randomising absolutely everything in your puppies life from the day you bring them home. We want to create a resilient puppy that can not predict, or become reliant on what is going to happen next. There are so many ways we can do this. Feed your puppy at random times, and in different ways (different food toys, scatter feeds in the yard, sometimes in a bowl), feed in different locations, again, at varying times of the day (sometimes in the laundry, outside the back door, in their pen or crate the variations are endless). Walk your puppy at different times of the day (morning some days, afternoon/evening other days). Put them outside at random times, into their pen at random times and change things up all the time. For older dogs, if you have a dog walker alternate days and ask them to come at different times of the day. Restricting their access to you randomly as mentioned earlier will hugely assist in this. Studies were done on cortisol levels of shelter dogs that were fed at the same time every day. They took a

reading 30 minutes before and 30 minutes after they were fed, on one particular day the dogs were not fed at the time they were used to. A reading was taken 30 minutes after expecting to be fed, and their cortisol levels had skyrocketed. This expectation and dependence on routine is easily preventable by feeding at random times.

And lastly, choose to reward your puppy for being independent! Pay your puppy attention when he or she is not focused on you. There are many ways we can do this, for example, go over to pat them when they are off doing their own thing, or if they go and lie down quietly on their bed, give them a pat or take them a treat. If they are outside, don't let them in when they are whining or staring through the glass door, rather wait till they go off and lie in the sun or off to explore the yard, this is the perfect time to open the door and call them in, or go out to play with them Surprise them when they least expect it. Initiate play when they give up trying to get your attention, when they settle in their pen - choose that moment to take them a food toy or chew. Feed them only when they stop hanging around you in the kitchen. The possibilities are endless. Be creative! You you will be reinforcing and encouraging independence.

While it is normal and expected that a new puppy will experience some mild stress and frustration around various types of restriction, we don't want them go into extreme distress. If you have a puppy that is not coping well and is unable to settle or cope with any of the above, there are many things that can be done to help them. We can reduce the criteria, starting off even more slowly and building up. Be sure to spend time in their pen, laundry and outside in the yard with them. Play with your puppy and feed them there so they see it as a place where good things happen. Use food toys to condition them to be happy in an area. Sit right next to them in the pen the first few times you put them in, gradually get further away. A DAP (Dog Appeasing Pheromone) collar can be very helpful as they are infused with the pheromone that lactating mothers emit which can be very calming and comforting for your puppy, enabling them to settle much more easily. Your vet will have these on hand.

Should you need further help or if you have an older dog or puppy who is struggling, there are many things that can be done to further help, please engage a professional trainer or vet behaviourist.