

# **Conditioning the Canine Retreat**

## **Preventing Separation Anxiety During and After COVID-19**

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**After COVID19  
Going Back To Work and Preventing Canine Separation Anxiety**

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Recently, there has been a lot of talk and concern about what's going to happen as we start going back to our NORMAL lives for our 4-footed friends. Over the last several months, most of our lives have been spent at home with our children and dogs so this has become a new normal for them, which can set them up for Separation Anxiety unless we start helping them transition them back to our normal routines. If you need more assistance resolving your dog's issues, consult a professional animal behavior specialist and/or your veterinarian.

Going back to work can be a smooth transition for your dog by taking some steps now. This is especially important for those who have added puppies, younger dogs, foster and rescue dogs to their families during this time we've had at home, or have dogs with a history of separation anxiety. Please read the following and take some time to watch the videos.

Below are step-by-step protocols for setting up a safe place your dog (Canine Retreat) and for separation anxiety. Both of these are important for our dogs so they will not be facing a drastic change as we all start getting back to our old routines.

### **What is Separation Anxiety?**

Separation anxiety is your dog's negative response to being left alone. Dogs are great companions because they become so attached to people, but that attachment can sometimes backfire in the form of "separation anxiety". Most dogs just curl up for a nap and await your return. However some dogs do exhibit adverse behaviors including excessive barking, household destruction and inappropriate elimination. These dogs are not acting out of spite or anger. They are unable to manage separation from "their people". With the recent changes in our routines, more activity in our households, people home all day with increased stress, our dogs are stressed. When all of this stops and routines begin to return to normal, our dogs will feel alone with the quiet and change in their routine and will become stressed, which can manifest as separation anxiety. By taking some steps now, you can keep this stress to a minimum.

### **Setting Up and Conditioning a Canine Retreat**

Adapted from: "*Happy Kids, Happy Dogs: Building a Friendship Right from the Start*" Barbara Shumannfang

Every dog needs an indoor space where they can be alone and undisturbed. Every human, needs to learn to respect a dog's space. When a dog is in their Canine Retreat, people may not interact with them. Using the Canine Retreat means teaching the dog to spend time away from family and being alone when it's time for a break or you are leaving the house. The Canine Retreat should never become the cue you are leaving for a long period of time, and should NEVER be used for punishment.

## **Where to Set Up the Canine Retreat**

Choose a room or location in the house to confine your dog so they can still hear household activities, but are separated from all of the activity. Provide fresh water, meals, edible toys and bedding for your dog in the safety zone. The Canine Retreat can be created with:

1. A hallway, mudroom, laundry room, or any other room.
2. A baby gate. This allows you to confine your dog to a low-traffic room adjacent to family activity such as a back hallway or mud room.
3. A crate. If your dog is already house-trained, consider using a larger crate for extra space and comfort.
4. An exercise pen (x-pen). The x-pen has panels so you can fold it to carry or store and comes in many heights and some even have a top.

## **When to Introduce and Use the Canine Retreat**

The Canine Retreat is a great way to get your dog used to being separated from humans. You can start using the Canine Retreat so your dog can adapt to being alone during some of the following times:

- Working at home, homeschooling the kids, cleaning the house, reading a book
- Calming your dog if adult or child comes over
- Leaving the home for errands or work, only after your dog is used to their Retreat and isn't anxious while there.

## **Teaching Your Dog to Use Their Canine Retreat**

Feeding your dog their meals in their Canine Retreat is a great way to start. You may use food dispensing toys which are appropriate for your dog's size and chewing ability. A large dog could eat through and swallow a puppy toy!

1. Feeding mats, KONG<sup>®</sup> toys or Busy Buddy<sup>™</sup> toys are examples of toys that will work well for feeding them or providing treats in their Retreat, making sure the food and toys are appropriate for your dog. Choose the toys that don't have ropes on them because dogs like to shake and toss them or they chew on the rope which can be dangerous.
2. Between meals, when your dog is not watching, put some special treats or a new bone in their Canine Retreat and let them find the treats when they go in to explore or rest.
3. While your dog is occupied finding treats or chewing on a bone in their Retreat, close the door and leave them to do something around the house. Begin with a very short period of time (5 minutes) and get back to them before they start to whine. Gradually increase the time your dog is in their Retreat. If your dog is immediately anxious about your being away, sit in a chair

near their Retreat while they eat and ignore them. At each of your dog's meals, move the chair a little further away until you are out of sight, read or chat on your phone while you're waiting.

### **Using a Verbal Cue to Get Your Dog Into Their Canine Retreat**

- Stand about 2 feet from the entrance with your dog, facing the entrance together. Keep your dog by your side with a treat.
- If your dog doesn't know the stay command hold them around the chest and let them see you toss a treat into the Retreat.
- Pause and then release them using a verbal cue like "Retreat!" just once.
- They will run into the Canine Retreat and get the treat.
- Praise and encourage them to come back out to you.
- Do this 5 to 6 times in quick succession.
- Feed their meals like this for a couple of days, tossing a small handful of food each time in lieu of a treat.
- Switch to *first* saying your verbal cue "Retreat!", then feed the treats to your dog once they are inside.
- Gradually increase your starting distance each time you cue "Retreat", so you won't need to stand near the Retreat each time.

### **Secrets to a Successful Canine Retreat**

In order to prevent your dog from barking or whining while in their Retreat:

- Choose a spot near family activities. Dogs want to be near their families and shouldn't be isolated for long periods of time.
- If you're using a crate, you can cover most of it with a light sheet or towel (allowing for air flow), especially at night.
- Give your dog plenty of exercise each day, especially before going into their Retreat. A tired dog is a happy dog.
- Provide safe, edible chew toys in the Canine Retreat, such as stuffed KONGs® or bones. Dee put together the following video showing her routine for preparing marrow bones <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BMMuk2NTShI&feature=share>. The following video shows her dogs 20 minutes after getting their bones <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E-UIPhQQ9Yc&feature=share>
- Ignore whining or it will escalate. A much more effective strategy is to prevent it to begin with by following the above plan closely.

- Helen St Pierre of No Monkey Business Dog Training in Concord NH ([www.nomonkeybusinessdogtraining.com](http://www.nomonkeybusinessdogtraining.com)) made this short video for her clients, which has some great ideas on teaching your puppy, adult, foster or rescue dog to be comfortable in its crate or confinement space (Canine Retreat). [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=46oa\\_m-4NMM&feature=youtu.be&fbclid=IwAR3ZorY1iII1K52W3t9Nlezj6j7Ej4dn9dtgFQOnxqHAKN59qS4fSwa5Q4](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=46oa_m-4NMM&feature=youtu.be&fbclid=IwAR3ZorY1iII1K52W3t9Nlezj6j7Ej4dn9dtgFQOnxqHAKN59qS4fSwa5Q4).

## **Desensitizing Your Dog to Separation** ([www.deesdogs.com](http://www.deesdogs.com))

The following is revised from Dee's book "*Changing People Changing Dogs: Positive Solutions for Difficult Dogs*"

Many of our dogs will recognize our normal cues for leaving them when our routines begin to return to normal, however, many may not recognize those cues. Additionally, if you have taken advantage of this time to get a puppy, a foster or a rescue dog, you **must** start patterning them for upcoming separation. This means changing the sequence of behaviors or cues you give before you actually leave. In preparing to change your cues do the following:

1. Write down exactly what you do when you get ready to leave the house.
2. Begin working on this routine each day NOW. Remember 3 to 5 minutes is a nice starting place in the beginning and for some might it be under 1 minute depending on your dog and their tolerance level.
3. Observe your dog carefully and identify when in the getting-ready-to-leave sequence your dog may begin to show anxiety.
4. Begin your desensitization program.
5. **Do not** leave your dog alone until you have seen improvement.

***If you did not begin soon enough and your dog is now suffering from separation anxiety, take them to work, hire a pet sitter or leave them with a friend. Your dog must not be left alone during this desensitizing process, which may take a month or more depending on your dog. This is so your dog doesn't "rehearse" their anxiety, the goal is to break the cycle.***

NOTE: You can use technology while going through these steps by using security cameras or setting up an extra laptop, tablet or phone using a live app such as Presence or any other dog or baby monitoring app and while you are away, can watch them in real time, and depending on the app, interact with them.

Malena DeMartini (<https://malenademartini.com/>) offers remote online training for you and your dog suffering from separation anxiety and has also published a book "*Treating Separation Anxiety*". In her book she will talk you through how to use technology in watching your dog live so you can see and observe their body language to see how they are handling you coming and going.

Debra Theriault, CPDT-KA, ACDBC of Yankee Dog Training suggests breaking things up for your dog by bringing them on some, **but not all**, car rides when you **MUST** venture out for groceries or medicine. Take special walks. If you use a crate be sure to crate your dog for some periods of time every day. If you don't use a crate, put them in a room by themselves for naps. Chews and treats can be provided to give them something to do while they wind down and relax. *Try to structure a routine that is as normal for your dog as it can be under the circumstances. Make structured separation from family time a rule for at least a few hours daily.* Leave the dog in the house or crate when you walk to the mailbox or go out to the bird feeder. When you come back into the house be neutral don't make a big fuss about coming back into the house. Watch your dog for any signs of anxiety, which might include pacing, whining, clinginess, and licking. SHUT the bathroom door! They don't need to follow you everywhere. Since you're also probably cooking and snacking more at home, try not to overfeed your dog! Ask your dog to do a few things for any treats you wish to give them such as sit or lie down, add in some stays and play hide and seek games.

## **Reconditioning the Meaning of Your “Getting-Ready-to-Leave” Cues**

The following is revised from Dee's book "*Changing People Changing Dogs: Positive Solutions for Difficult Dogs*"

The reconditioning program is based on changing your dog's reaction to your cues. **Because most of us are home all day right now, this process can be repeated several times per day, as long as your dog is not becoming more anxious by your repeated cues.**

1. Begin your getting ready to leave sequence.
2. At the point where your behavior begins to cause an anxiety response (i.e.: panting, pacing whining) in your dog, break away from your “leaving” sequence and do something completely out of the ordinary. For example, start to clean the room or fold some clothes or sit down and read a book. Don't continue to get ready to leave. You are now breaking the cues. If your dog is okay at this point, go to Step 6, where you must leave the house.
3. If you have seen a reaction and are changing your cues, when the dog is calm (maybe 5 – 10 minutes) begin the getting-ready-to leave sequence again. Stop the sequence when the anxiety behavior starts. Do a different sequence of behavior (activity) until the dog is calm. You can even go play a good game of fetch. Your dog will be really surprised, more tired, and ready for some time alone to rest
4. Repeat steps 1, 2 and 3 until you can get through the entire sequence right to the door.
5. Once you are able to get to the door just put your hand on the doorknob and then go sit down or do something else but don't leave.
6. When you can go out and return quickly with no adverse behavior from your dog, lengthen your time outside. Starting with seconds and working up to minutes and so on. *Be sure to change the amount of time you stay outside - from shorter to longer to shorter again.* Get in the car and drive out of the driveway, then return. When you come back in the house be calm and aloof. Don't acknowledge your dog until you do some small chore and when the dog is calm and quiet. Then speak quietly. **Be calm and aloof - don't make a fuss.**

7. Next try your entire getting-ready-to-leave sequence and go out *with* your dog. Take your dog with you to work, to a friend's, for a walk or on an errand.
8. Each morning repeat this sequence until your dog isn't stressed by your getting-ready-to-leave behaviors.
9. Now it's time to lengthen the amount of time you're away from the house. First 2 minutes, then 5 minutes, then 1 minute, then 10 minutes, etc. Vary the amount of time you are gone from shorter to longer to shorter again. Soon you will be able to leave for longer and longer periods of time.

## **Helpful Hints**

- Don't expect too much, too fast from your dog. Changing these behaviors will take time and patience. This is the perfect time to work on this!
- Give your dog a special, long lasting treat to distract them from your absence. A KONG® or marrow bone smeared or filled with peanut butter or yogurt tastes great and will keep them busy for hours. See recipes below.
- Be sure your dog gets plenty of exercise when you are home and before you leave.
- Try to change all of your patterns with your dog. Play ball or go for walks at different times and in different sequences.
- If you see anxiety developing in your dog, defuse it by changing the behavior pattern you are in. Avoid patterns of your behavior that may reward your dog's anxiety. Examples could include telling your dog it's ok, making a fuss when you leave, etc. Use security cameras or use a device so you can observe your dog while you are away. You can observe their behaviors either in real time or after the fact and determine how long after you leave their anxiety may begin, or if there are triggers for their anxiety that may occur later in the day.
- Leaving the TV or music on can be calming for your dog and they may not feel so alone. Classical music can be very calming for dogs, but try different types of music to see what may work the best for your dog.
- You can try pheromones (DAP), Bach Flower Rescue Remedy and/or essential oils (<https://www.animaleo.info/>) (This brand is recommended as this company is owned and operated by a veterinarian. Many essential oils are not safe for all animals and some are not even oils).
- Teaching The Sit-Stay And Down-Stay. Practice sit-stay or down-stay exercises using positive reinforcement. Never punish your dog during these training sessions. Gradually increase the distance you move away from your dog. Your goal is to be able to move briefly out of your dog's sight while he remains in the "stay" position. The point is to teach

your dog that they can remain calm and happy in one place while you go to another. As you progress, you can do this during the course of your normal daily activities. For example, if you're watching television with your dog by your side and you get up for a snack, tell your dog to stay, and leave the room. When you come back, give your dog a treat or quietly praise them. However, you never want to leave your dog on a stay command when you leave the house for long periods of time.

- Teach and practice the “stay” exercise. When your dog is up to a 10-minute stay, go out of sight for a few seconds. Gradually increase the amount of time to 10 minutes. Reward your dog for being away from you and not following you around. If your dog stays lying down while you are someplace else then toss them a treat. Don't call your dog to you!

Remember, your dog wants to please you, but must understand what you want and what is and is not acceptable. Your patience, consistency and love will help them modify their behavior so as to fit appropriately into the routine of your household.

### **Interim Solutions**

Because the above-described treatments can take a while, and because a dog with separation anxiety can do serious damage to themselves and/or your home, in the interim, some of the following suggestions may be helpful in dealing with the problems in the short-term:

- Consult your veterinarian about the possibility of drug therapy. A good anti-anxiety drug should not sedate your dog, but simply reduce anxiety while you're gone. Such medication is a temporary measure and must be used in conjunction with behavior modification techniques.
- Take your dog to a dog day care facility or boarding kennel.
- Leave your dog with a friend, family member or neighbor.
- Take your dog to work with you, even for half a day, if possible.

### **What Won't Help A Separation Anxiety Problem**

- Punishment is not an effective way to treat separation anxiety. In fact, if you punish your dog after you return home it may actually increase his separation anxiety.
- Getting another pet. This usually doesn't help an anxious dog as the anxiety is the result of separation from you, not merely the result of being alone.
- Crating your dog can make separation anxiety worse if the dog panics and then the crate isn't a safe place. Your dog will still engage in anxiety responses in the crate, and may urinate, defecate, howl or even injure themselves in an attempt to escape from the crate.



- Obedience classes. While obedience training is always a good idea, it won't directly help a separation anxiety problem. **Separation anxiety is not the result of disobedience or lack of training, it's a panic response.**

## **KONG® Toys**



<https://www.kongcompany.com/learn/stuff-a-kong>

<https://www.kongcompany.com/lets-play/recipes>

<https://www.rover.com/blog/ultimate-kong-stuffing-recipe-guide/>

It is important for dogs to succeed at their "work". Make it easy to remove the KONG® stuffing at first. You can make a KONG® more challenging for your dog:

- Pack stuffing tighter.
- Wedge biscuits inside the cavity using the inside rim of the opening to secure them.
- KONGSICLES. Try various combinations of canned food, gravy, noodles, rice and mashed potatoes mixed with food nuggets and freeze. KONGSICLES are a favorite. Put some peanut butter in the small end of the KONG® to plug it. Turn it upside down in a cup. Fill it full of water, chicken broth or fruit juice and freeze. Kongsicles are recommended for outdoor use.
- CHEESE. Mix cheese pieces or cheese spread with food nuggets and microwave until cheese melts. Let it cool to a safe temperature and stuff the KONG®. Use a cup to hold the KONG® when freezing.

## **KONG® Hunting**

- Hide stuffed KONGs® indoors or outdoors. Dogs love searching for their KONGs®!
- Hide stuffed KONGs® randomly throughout the day so they won't always be associated with your leaving.
- If your dog is getting several KONGs® per day, you should appropriately reduce the size of their meals.

- Your dog's job will last until the KONGs® are “clean”.
- You can keep your dog "working" all day if you provide enough stuffed KONGs®.
- Remember, you're feeding your dog with KONGs®. If they get multiple KONGs® throughout the day and they are inside and alone for a long period of time, they could have accidents.
- Clean KONGs® thoroughly after use! KONGs® are dishwasher safe.

**IMPORTANT! Use KONGs® Safely!** Your dog's safety is your responsibility! ALWAYS supervise your dog's use of Kongs until you are confident they can be used safely without you! Read the instructions on the website! <https://www.kongcompany.com/learn/what-is-a-kong>