



Prince George Veterinary Hospital
3827 18th Avenue
Prince George, BC
V2N 1B1
Phone: (250) 563-1541
Fax: (778) 309-7925
www.princegeorgevet.ca
info@princegeorgevet.ca



Separation Anxiety

Most animals would be more than happy to spend all their time with their families but unfortunately this is often not possible. Animals should feel comfortable at home alone when their families are out of the house for long periods of time or they are likely to engage in problematic behaviour such as destroying things in the house, barking, howling or getting into things that they shouldn't. While this is most commonly seen in dogs, it can be an issue for other animals as well such as cats. Fortunately, there are several training exercises you can do to help get them more comfortable being alone.

• Structure Your Relationship With Your Animal

- Anxiety is worsened when an animal is unable to predict what will happen in their environment or when they interact with people. Improving communication between pets and people can greatly improve calm and relaxed behaviour.
- Try to structure your animal's day in a predictable routine. Ideally, this should be about the same everyday. Your chosen structure should be consistent with every person who interacts with your animal. A consistent routine teaches your animal what they can expect will happen each day which improves their ability to predict events and lowers anxiety.
- You should also develop clear commands and cues to use when people interact with your animal
 - To start, choose a command or commands that your animal knows very well (such as sit, lie down, give a paw etc).
 - Whenever your animal wants access to a privilege (such as going outside, grooming, cuddles, before they're fed etc) they should be asked to perform this.
 - Give them access to the privilege after they perform the calm behaviour
 - Be sure to reward them if they perform these behaviours without you having to ask them.

- Create clear cues to tell them how you will be interacting with them (showing them a cloth before wiping their paws, letting them sniff the hairbrush before grooming etc).
- All of this teaches your animal not only how to politely ask for what they want, but also tells them what you are intending to do with them. Both help to decrease anxiety.
- Do not use punishment for poor behaviour. This will likely increase their anxiety, leading to worse behaviour and even aggression. Punishment can also be a form of attention which can actually re-enforce problem behaviours.
- Instead of using punishment, attention seeking behaviour (such as barking, whining or pawing) should be ignored and attention given when they are showing calm and relaxed behavior.
- Set aside times after play, training or exercise where you ignore your animal. This will help encourage self-play, exploration and being comfortable without your attention.
- Be sure that everyone in the house follows the training rules you create. Inconsistent training is much less likely to work.

- **Tranquility Training**

- Just as energetic behaviors (such as agility or fetch) can be taught on command, so can calm and relaxed behaviors.
- To begin with, choose a mat or blanket to use for training. Have your animal come over and sit on the mat for a reward. Ask them to perform calm and relaxed behavior (such as quiet sitting, calmly laying down etc) and calmly reward them for doing so. These sessions should be short (5-10min) and frequent (several times a week).
- Training on the mat/blanket allows your animal to associate it with calm and relaxed behaviour. The mat can also be moved around the house to train in different areas.
- When your animal is beginning to show signs of stress or anxiety, they should be redirected towards the mat and engaged in a session of tranquility training. Over time, they may go to this spot themselves to self-soothe when they are feeling anxious (including when you are not home)

- **Separation Training**

- Some animals are not comfortable being away from certain people and will get anxious and upset when separated from them even if other people or other animals are around. Reducing this behaviour requires that the training below be done with the person who they are attached to.
- To begin, the person who the dog is attached to should practice tranquility training with them (teaching them to calmly sit and lie down on command). The person can then ask them to perform this behaviour when they are farther away from them. Slowly increase this distance over the course of numerous sessions.

- Once they are doing well with distance, you can try going around a corner or behind a door for a brief period of time, rewarding them for calmly staying in their spot.
- Each increase in distance should only be attempted once your animal has mastered the previous distance. If they do not stay put, calmly re-direct them back to their spot and try again at a shorter distance
- Short and frequent sessions will be more successful and less frustrating
- Be sure that your animal has plenty of things to do at home to keep them pre-occupied. Slow feeder toys, Kongs with frozen wet food and toys can all help pre-occupy your animal's time while alone. Rotating out sets of toys weekly can help decrease boredom and give the illusion of constant new toys being added to the house. Exercise or training before leaving is also helpful to decrease the amount of spare energy your animal will have while you are gone.
- Leaving and returning home should be made as calm as possible. When leaving, the goal is not to sneak away (this can worsen separation anxiety) but to calmly leave without much fuss. Likewise, when arriving home, your animal should be ignored for 10-15min or until they are showing calm and relaxed behaviour.
- If your animal becomes anxious with certain leaving cues (such as picking up keys or putting on shoes), these should be done repeatedly throughout the day without leaving. This will dissociate the cues from you actually leaving.
- If you plan on kenneling your dog while you are out of the house, it would be a good idea to kennel-train them first. Kennel training help teach animals to be comfortable and relaxed while being confined first as some animals become more anxious when confined and this can lead to destructive behaviour
- Doggy dare care or pet sitters can be a good temporary fix while working on this training or it can be a permanent option as well.

Your veterinarian may also feel that anti-anxiety medication might help especially if your animal is anxious much of the time. If attempts at these training sessions do not work or if there are other medical or behavioural issues that complicate the issue, a behavioural consult with Dr. Cousins may be recommended as the problem may not solely be due to separation anxiety issues. Talk to your regular veterinarian if a consult is something you would like to learn more about.