

# Dealing With Home-Alone Problems

*By Terry Ryan*

A lot has been written about latchkey children, but what about our modern society's latchkey dogs? Leaving your dog home alone is not just a matter of dog-proofing your house so he can do minimal damage. Consider the dog. Some dogs are okay without people, but the majority of our dogs will suffer, in varying degrees, from social isolation. Loneliness is not only pitiful on the day it occurs, but the stress can be cumulative and can make the dog physically ill.

Some dogs have a low tolerance for holding it together while in social isolation. Plan strategies to teach your dog, from the very first day he comes to live with you, that he will be home alone at times. Here are a few brief points to help you condition or rehabilitate your dog for spending stress-free time home alone.

- One of the best investments you can make for your dog are several thoughtfully selected home-alone hobby toys. Strategies for the use of such toys is a subject for a future article! Talk to your instructor or pet shop owner regarding safe and appropriate toys that your dog will enjoy - all by himself.
- A young puppy or newly adopted dog naturally likes to follow humans around. Make a habit of closing the bathroom door and not allowing the dog to follow you in. Keep his mind off you by placing a food stuffed toy down as you close the door. When you come back out, pick up the toy and put it away.
- Crate training is the subject another article, but in brief, a crate can be used in home-alone training. Systematically desensitize your dog to be left alone in the crate by putting him in and letting him out again without leaving the house. Praise him while he's in the crate, ignore him for a while after he comes out.
- Next place him in his crate in a different room, but within sight of you. Make these planned separation sessions a pleasant association for your dog. Give a special toy or his meal during these few minutes of alone time.
- Use the crate while you go into the bathroom or take the trash out. These are times when your dog realizes you will be back very soon, therefore won't worry.
- NOTE: Prior to 4-5 months of age, your dog physically cannot control his bladder and/or bowel functions longer than 4-5 hours, and he will have no alternative but to relieve himself in his crate. If you must leave a young dog alone for longer than 4 hours, consider getting a pet sitter or neighbor to come in to walk and play with your dog.
- Teach your dog that being with other people is fun, not a worry. Redirect some of your dog's focus to other people, activities, and toys. Get trustworthy friends to do her favorite things with her instead of you: take him for a walk, play fetch, go for a car ride, give him his dinner bowl.
- Chances are that in your dog's life there will be occasions when you must leave her somewhere overnight. Don't wait until you HAVE to leave your dog, plan ahead. Ask a friend that is well-versed in "dog" to keep your puppy at his house overnight. Perhaps you'll want to start with just a few hours in the afternoon.
- Keep departures non-emotional by leaving quietly. Upon returning, walk in calmly and do not greet your dog until later. These subdued arrivals and departures are an attempt to make the separation less dramatic. Any attention taken away at greetings and departures will be given back at a different time during the day. For at least 20 minutes before a departure, the dog should be totally ignored. You may have to rearrange your schedule a bit and set your alarm earlier if you take a morning walk to allow "chill out" time before you leave!