

Dog Behaviour Explained

16. Do dogs get separation anxiety because they love their owners too much?

Separation anxiety is an anxiety based condition and there are usually other sources of stress in the dog's life which are interlinked – emotions are cumulative. Whilst it is caused by hyper attachment, this is due to the dog seeking social affiliation in aversive situations. Dogs with separation anxiety do not feel they can cope alone and can suffer extreme panic – seen typically in vocalizations, loss of control of their bladder and bowels, and destruction in an attempt to escape (which can include self-injury). It occurs every time the owner leaves and immediately on them leaving (other home alone problems may occur later and be due to boredom, external stimuli, opportunistic / habit, needs not generally being met e.g. insufficient exercise, lack of opportunity to go out).

Separation anxiety is a horrible condition and needs treating to prevent further suffering.

The relationship between the owner and dogs needs to be normalised and the dog needs to learn he can cope on his own through learning problem solving skills, independence and gaining self-confidence. They usually need a generalised stress reduction programme followed by specific desensitisation to being alone.

17. Should you always practice taking the dogs food off him?

Some people believe they should always be able to take their dogs food off them or put their hands in the dogs bowl and remarkably many dogs accept this (I don't think I would be so tolerant if you did it to me!). Whilst it is good for a dog to accept people being around whilst he is eating, this does take confidence. If your dog is ok with this, ensure you keep your presence positive by adding new high value titbits to their meal rather than just removing it. However, if your dog does not like being disturbed when eating, this can be understandable and easily managed by ensuring the dog is left in peace whilst eating and nobody, especially children, should go near him. Many dogs can guard their food bowl whilst eating, without showing any aggression or resource guarding tendencies in any other situation and where this is the case, management is often the best option. Where dogs are showing aggression in multiple circumstances or their behaviour is less predictable this should be addressed in conjunction with a behaviourist.

18. Are dogs are hunters?

The dogs ancestor, the grey wolf, is an apex predator – e.g. a hunter at the top of the food chain. However, when dogs domesticated themselves and started to live around human settlements they became scavengers. In the process, they lost their pack mentality and most dogs no longer have a complete predatory motor pattern. The full hunting sequence is Eye, Orient, Stalk, Chase, Grab Bite, Kill Bite / Shake, Dissect, Consume. Most dogs show part of the motor pattern but few have the full sequence intact. However it is by exaggerating parts of the pattern that dogs were able to develop their specialised roles e.g. herding, chasing, guarding etc.

Next time, we will be answering:

Do dogs feel guilty when they have done something wrong?

Does repeating commands help your dog learn?

Do dogs dream?