

Separation related behaviours

Animal Behaviour Clinic

What are SRBs

Separation related behaviours (SRBs) are unwanted behaviours which are only shown when dogs left alone by their owners. Research has shown that between 13% and 20% of dog owners recognised that their dogs showed signs of SRBs. However, this is likely to under-represent the problem, because by the very nature, these behaviours occur when the owner is out of the house. Dogs that are worried about being left alone will often learn to recognise all the signs which lead up to their owner leaving the house and may therefore show signs of anxiety sometime before their owner has left.



Common signs

- Barking
- Howling
- Destruction or chewing
- Toileting inside
- Aggression
- Uneaten treats
- Excessive drooling

Why do they develop?

Dogs are a highly social species, and it is 'normal' for them to retain contact with their social group unless they learn that being alone is OK. When a puppy is first separated from its mother and littermates, it will almost always vocalise to try and make contact again. It may also try and escape from confinement to get back to its family. Unless the puppy learns that being alone is not scary, then these responses can be retained. This is one of the most common causes of SRB in adult dogs.

SRBs can also develop for a number of other reasons. For example, dogs can associate being left alone with a scary event, such as a loud noise. In other cases, dogs can do things like chewing or digging when owners are out because they have limited access to fun things to do, or are told off for doing them when their owners are in.

Once SRBs occur they can worsen over time due to other factors. For example if owners tell their pet off when they come home to find a mess, this can result in increased anxiety – the dog will often be anxious about their owner returning as well as being alone.

Because individual cases can be complex, it is important to seek help from a qualified behaviourist who can tailor a specific treatment programme for each dog.

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Guidance for owners

If you are concerned that your dog might have a SRB, the first step is to try and record your dog when you go out of the house. Set a camera up pointing towards where you think the dog is likely to be – for example if you normally come home and your dog is in his bed, then try setting up the camera pointing at the dog bed. Some dogs with SRB spend a lot of time at or near the door that you leave through, so it you could also try setting up a camera pointing towards the door. You may need to try a few times before you find the best place to record what your dog gets up to.

Once you have a recording of your dog, have a close look at it. You may see obvious signs of SRB, such as barking or howling. You may also see that your dog spends a lot of time showing quite active signs that he is worried. For example, he may run about, look out of windows, run up and down stairs, sometimes stopping to listen and perhaps panting. In other cases, you might see that your dog stays fairly still, but remains alert, listening and shows more subtle signs that he is worried, for example by panting and having a [tense posture](#).

If you see any of these signs it would be worth taking action. Even if the signs appear quite mild, it does not necessarily mean that your dog is not experiencing stress.

Because SRB can develop for different reasons, treatment programmes are best tailored to individual dogs. It is best to seek help from a qualified behaviourist, such as a [Certified Clinical Animal Behaviourist](#) or full member of the [Association of Pet Behaviour Counsellors](#), who can identify what are the important factors for your dog and develop the treatment with you. Treatment programmes will often include a number of elements, for example:

- Teaching the dog that it is not scary to be left alone
- Helping the dog to become more independent of owner attention
- Addressing other fears which have become associated with being alone
- Reducing the association between 'leaving cues' and going out

A very important element of all SRB cases is to make sure that you do not punish or tell off your dog when you get home. Dogs which toilet or scratch holes in the skirting board when their owners are out do not know that these behaviours are 'wrong'. They do these things because they are anxious or fearful – and telling them off will not reduce this. It will often make things worse, because they will also start to worry about what will happen when their owner comes back.



Prevention

SRB is a common and serious welfare problem for dogs. It is also entirely preventable in most cases. The key for prevention is ensuring that puppies learn at a very young age that it is OK to be left alone. There are two key aspects to successfully teaching a puppy about being alone:

- Separation should be associated with something good.
- The time that the puppy is left alone should be built up in gradual stages.

In practice, this might mean first teaching a puppy to settle in its bed or crate, and giving it a tasty chew or treat – ideally one which takes some time to eat and is especially reserved for this training. Once the puppy has learnt to settle down on cue for the chew, the owner can start to take steps away whilst the puppy is chewing, before returning. Over time the distance and time period of which the puppy is left can be gradually increased. The speed at which this can be developed will vary between individual puppies – but time invested at this time will give a lifetime of a dog that can easily be left alone. The idea is for the puppy to be pleased that their owner is leaving because they get a tasty chew toy or do this, rather than worrying about being alone.