

Separation Anxiety and the Covid-19 Puppy or Adopted Dog

By Marian Pott, Trainer for San Mateo Dog Training Club

As a professional dog trainer, I have definitely seen my share of separation anxiety over the years, but prior to this pandemic, it was on a now and again schedule. As reported by my fellow dog trainers, those in the rescue business of shelters or foster homes, and veterinarians, separation anxiety is definitely on the rise in our current times, simply because people are getting what we refer to as Covid puppies or adoptees of any age. People who have never had a dog or a puppy are now learning the joys of having a dog in their lives. For some, dog ownership isn't new, but starting with a puppy is, or perhaps they had dogs growing up but now is their first effort living with a dog as an adult or in retirement or while home schooling the kids.

When you acquire a puppy, it's best to have a plan in place for safe confinement, housebreaking, separation from you/the family, and structure within the home. These things fall under the general title of training. One of the best tools to help with all of these things is the crate. Other helps are exercise pens, aka x-pens, and dog runs. A dog run or kennel is generally a bigger space and is set up either outside or in one's garage, whereas a crate and x-pen can be set up anywhere inside a home, apartment, condo, as space allows.

Other than being the most effective way to teaching potty training, a crate also provides a safe place to leave your puppy for napping during the day and confinement whenever you are home and cannot supervise or you cannot be home and therefore can't supervise. An xpen is not a substitute for a crate but provides added space and may be used in conjunction with a crate or in another space altogether; it provides more of a play pen experience.

What is currently happening more and more in new puppy or newly adopted dog homes is the absence of these things which means the humans are often enslaved to their dogs, i.e., someone always has to be supervising otherwise the puppy is pottying inappropriately, destroying, getting into dangerous situations, etc. But what these people are also unwittingly creating is the puppy or dog which cannot be left alone. These dogs are often whining, barking, howling, when they are left alone for minutes; hours is unheard of! They may show other signs of anxiety such as pacing, scratching at the door or window, destroying furniture or other things as a way of relieving anxiety.

Puppies and dogs which are properly crate trained or otherwise safely confined have learned to love their space, their crates are considered dens (the canine inherently is a denning creature), and they know how to be alone for periods of time. And their humans have a level of freedom: they can work from home without constantly watching the puppy or requiring another family member to do so; they can go shopping for groceries or some other dog-free activity. In post-Covid restriction these same people will be able to go see the latest block buster movie and go out to dinner afterwards or go to the mall or a museum again because they know their dog can handle the separation and they know their dog is safe in that separation.

If you are experiencing what you think may be early signs of separation anxiety or perhaps your dog is more firmly entrenched in it, consulting a trainer with experience in working with such behavior may be the best way to move forward. The answer is not doggy daycare or the dog park or the pet sitter or your neighbor; these might be helpful in some ways (but also possibly not), but they don't substitute for raising your puppy to be confident and trusting or helping your adopted dog to live well and learn to trust and be comfortable in its forever home.

If you foresee one day going back to work in an office or school or enjoying aspects of your life where you can't always be accompanied by your dog, then now is the time for training and conditioning your dog towards that goal. No dog will take well to having you in its company 24/7, and to have that scenario change without warning or assistance in adapting in a healthy way. Dogs want to be a companion. They would choose to be with us most if not all of the time! It is our responsibility to teach them they can also be left alone. We will come back; we will shut off our computer; we will give them attention and play and exercise.