

Separation-Related Behaviors

What Separation-Related Behaviors are (and are not), common myths, and practical steps for adopters and fosters in a new home

Many dogs show increased clinginess, vocalization, or trouble settling when they first move into a new home. For many dogs, these are transitional behaviors that improve as routines become predictable. For other dogs, being left alone triggers panic that needs a structured plan and sometimes veterinary support ^{[1][2][3]}.

This resource will focus on separation-related behaviors (SRBs): behaviors that appear during separation (or perceived separation) from people, and how we can respond in a way that reduces rehearsal of distress and builds tolerance safely.

What Separation-Related Behaviors Are

SRBs are patterns of behavior that occur when a dog is separated from people, or when access to people is blocked. They are best understood as an emotional response (fear, panic, frustration, or a mix), not "disobedience"^{[4][5]}.

Common SRBs can include:

- Vocalizing (barking, whining, howling)
- Pacing/restlessness, scanning for the person
- Scratching/chewing at exits or confinement points (door, crate, gate)
- Drooling, panting, trembling
- Elimination that happens specifically during separation
- Escape attempts that occur when access to people is blocked
- Hypervigilance (remaining oriented to the environment rather than resting)

Best practice: Use video. Owner reports can miss early or subtle signs, and some behaviors are easier to notice than others (e.g., destruction vs. quietly alert) ^[6]. Video recorded during the first 10–20 minutes of absence is particularly valuable, as most distress behaviors occur within this timeframe ^[7].

[Setting up a nanny cam and recording your dog for free](#)

What SRBs are Not

Some behaviors can look like SRBs but have different causes **and need a different plan:**

- Normal [puppy behavior](#) that resolves quickly (many puppies change early after adoption and improve with development/routine)
- [Housetraining](#) gaps, especially during a move or schedule disruption
- Boredom/under-enrichment (problem behavior also happens when people are home or when the dogs needs are insufficiently met prior to departure)
- Reactivity to outside triggers (people/dogs/noises) that happens to occur when you're gone
- Medical issues (GI upset, urinary disease, pain) affecting elimination/comfort
- Confinement anxiety distinct from separation anxiety ([see section below](#))

If SRBs start suddenly, escalate quickly, or elimination changes appear, talk with your veterinarian to rule out medical contributors and discuss whether medication support is appropriate^[8].

Three Common Alone-Time Profiles

These can overlap. The label matters less than the plan, but it helps guide treatment setup and next steps ^{[4][8]}.

1) [Confinement Anxiety](#) (Confinement Distress)

The dog panics when confined, even if people are nearby or still home. This often includes frantic escape behavior. Many dogs do better in a dog-proofed room or gated area than in a crate.

2) [Isolation Distress](#) (True Alone-Time Distress)

The dog struggles when left truly alone (no people present), but may do fine if *any* calm person is there. Distress often begins quickly after departure ^[7].

3) [Separation Anxiety Tied To An Insecure Attachment To A Specific Person](#)

Distress is tied strongly to separation from a particular attachment figure, not just "being alone." A dog may tolerate another calm person but panic when the primary person leaves ^{[12][13]}.

Common Myths and Misconceptions

These are common myths you will likely encounter, especially if you've been searching online for solutions. These myths can slow progress and increase distress.

Myth: "He's doing it out of spite."

Reality: SRBs are a distress response, not revenge ^[4]. Dogs do not have a sense of right and wrong, so if your dog looks "guilty" when you return to an alone time accident, what you are seeing is a reaction to the environmental factors taking place. *If there's poop on the floor and they destroyed the box of tissues and your favorite book, it's likely that your reaction has more influence on their reaction than remorse.*

Myth: "Crating fixes separation issues."

Reality: A crate helps only if the dog is already comfortable. For some dogs, confinement increases

panic ^{[4][10]}. Picture if you or someone you know was having a panic attack and we told you that all they needed was to be confined to a coffin. *Would this be likely to stop the panic attack?*

Myth: "Let him cry it out."

Reality: Letting your dog cry it out may lead to increased stress around spending time alone. Panic has a way of validating panic. Repeated distress can maintain or worsen SRBs. Treatment aims to keep the dog under their threshold of panic during practice ^[8].

Myth: "Punishing destructive alone time behaviors and accidents will discourage them from happening again."

Reality: Aversive training methods are associated with increased problem behaviors and risk factors like aggression and anxiety, punishment does not address the underlying emotion driving SRBs ^[15]. Using punishment based tools like bark collars that shock or spray citronella and devices that emit high frequency tones to interrupt distress behavior have the potential to make alone time feel less safe.

Myth: "She's spoiled / too attached."

Reality: Research does not support a simple "too much love causes SRBs" story; allowing a dog on your bed, couch, or having close physical contact is not shown to be the primary cause of separation anxiety ^{[16][17]}. ([see section: Comforting, Affection, and Emotions below](#))

Myth: "Ignore your dog before you leave and when you return."

Reality: Experimental and survey evidence does not support arrival/departure intensity as a primary cause of SRBs in newly adopted dogs ^{[6][7]}. Some research suggests that ignoring greetings is likely without merit ^[7]. What matters is consistency and emotional neutrality: calm hellos and goodbyes, not dramatic intensity in either direction.

Myth: "A second dog fixes it."

Reality: Another dog is not a reliable solution; preadoption counseling that included this type of advice did not reduce SRB development ^[18]. A second dog may help some dogs with isolation distress who just need a companion present, but will not help dogs with true separation anxiety (tied to a specific person) ^[19]. Worse, you could end up with two anxious dogs.

Myth: "A food toy will fix it."

Reality: Food can help some dogs, but many will not eat when anxious. Think about whether or not you would want a snack while falling out of an airplane. For some dogs, it can also become a departure predictor and increase anxiety if the dog associates it with being left ^{[8][20]}. Food toys work best as part of a broader plan, not alone.

Myth: "Medication alone will fix it."

Reality: Medication may reduce anxiety and support learning, but dogs still need training to learn alone-time coping ^[8].

Understanding Confinement Anxiety

Confinement anxiety (or confinement distress) is a separate but often overlapping condition in which a dog panics when confined, in a crate, pen, or closed room, regardless of whether people are present

^[9]. This is a critical distinction because the treatment differs significantly from separation anxiety management.

Signs of confinement anxiety include:

- Frantic escape behavior (biting/chewing crate bars, intense scratching)
- Injury from escape attempts (torn nails, bloody muzzles, broken teeth)
- Panic in the presence of the guardian, as long as the dog is confined
- Difficulty relaxing even in a familiar, small space

Why this matters: Many dogs do better in a dog-proofed room or gated area than in a crate. Forcing a dog with confinement anxiety into a crate can escalate panic leading to self-injury or even death during escape attempts ^[10]. If your dog shows extreme distress in confinement, stop using that setup and reach out for help. Safety comes first.

Assessment for confinement anxiety: If a dog remains calm when confined with you at home, but shows signs of distress when left alone in confinement, the dog likely has separation related problems in addition to confinement issues. Conversely, if the dog panics in confinement *regardless of your presence*, confinement anxiety is the primary concern and should be addressed before attempting any confinement-based management strategies.

Building Tolerance for Crate Training (When Appropriate)

For dogs without confinement anxiety, a properly introduced crate can become a safe space. However, this requires a patient, gradual approach that many guardians underestimate^[11].

Safe crate introduction (for dogs who tolerate confinement):

1. **Associate the crate with positive experiences before any confinement:**
 - Feed meals near or in the open crate
 - Toss high-value treats inside
 - Allow the dog to explore freely for several weeks
2. **Introduce door closure gradually:**
 - Close the door for a few seconds, then open and reward
 - Slowly increase duration while you remain nearby
 - Never force the dog inside; allow voluntary entry
3. **Practice departures only after comfort is established:**
 - Once the dog settles calmly in the crate with you present for 30+ minutes, begin brief practice departures
 - Start with 30 seconds to 1 minute outside the room
 - Return before distress escalates

4. **Increase duration slowly over weeks/months, not days**

Most dogs need 2–4 weeks to tolerate crate confinement for a few hours

Dogs with prior anxiety may need 6–12 weeks or more

Critical point: If your dog shows any signs of panic during introduction (whining that escalates, frantic scratching, attempts to escape), stop and consult with a behavior professional. Forcing the process will worsen anxiety.

See also: [APA's comprehensive resource on Crate Training](#)

Transitional SRBs in a New Home

Many newly placed dogs show temporary SRBs during the decompression period (often within the first few weeks).

Triggers commonly include:

- New sights/sounds/smells
- Schedule changes
- Loss of familiar people/animals
- A new confinement setup
- Inconsistent departure patterns

For many dogs, transitional SRBs improve as routines become predictable. Post-adoption tracking studies show several behavior categories, including some attention-seeking/separation-related items, can decrease over time ^{[1][2]}. Puppies also commonly change throughout the first months after adoption ^[14].

See Also: [Bringing Home A New Dog](#)

Priorities in the First 2–3 Weeks

Prevent panic rehearsals when possible. Rehearsing intense distress can maintain the problem and strain the bond. Each time a dog panics and learns they can "survive" that panic, it reinforces anxiety ^[11].

Choose the safest setup (not necessarily a crate). Use the space where the dog shows the lowest distress.

Keep routines boring and predictable. Predictability and access to coping options can reduce anxiety.

Use video when you can. It is hard to judge progress without seeing the first 10–20 minutes of real absences.

Ensure basic needs are met. A dog with adequate exercise, mental enrichment, potty routine, and scheduled mealtimes is more likely to settle successfully ^{[4][8]}.

Avoid long 6-8 hour absences while your dog is settling in if possible, but don't avoid those short departures. Go get the mail, take the bins to the curb, go sweep off the front stoop, and as they settle into your patterns, pop out for milk and eggs and go grab take out. These small errands fit into your life and can go a long way toward establishing your dog's new normal.

See Also: [Canine Enrichment](#)

Building Independence Through At-Home Practice

Before working on departures, your dog needs to feel safe being separated from you *while you are still home*. These exercises build independence and tolerance for alone time in low-pressure situations ^{[21][22]}.

Particularly with dogs in transition, it is important to foster a secure attachment in the first few months in a new home. There is no direct correlation between being a “velcro dog” and separation related behaviors. While dogs that suffer from alone time phobias may be more likely to follow their person everywhere, plenty of dogs with secure attachments are also “velcro dogs”.

Normalize Separation Without Leaving

Independence training helps dogs learn that being in a different room from you, or at a physical distance from you, is safe and routine. This is foundational work that reduces anxiety about the guardian's absence.

Together but separate practice:

Build distance in the same room: Sit on the couch and ask your dog to rest on a mat a few feet away. Calmly drop treats to the mat when they are relaxed there. Gradually increase the distance between you and the mat over days or weeks ^[21].

Short in-home separations: Use a gate or door to be in another part of the home for very short periods (seconds at first → minutes). Then return calmly. Keep sessions short and frequent instead of doing a few very hard ones ^[21].

Normalize you moving around: Pair neutral movements (standing up, walking to the bathroom, going to another room) with no fanfare. If your dog springs up every time you move, briefly pause attention when they shadow you, and give attention when they choose to settle away from you ^[21].

Creating Positive Predictive Routines at Home

These reps are done while you are still in the home, with no actual out-the-door absence. They teach your dog that “you moving away” is boring, safe, and predictable long before you add real absences ^[22].

Develop a “leaving = safe” pattern:

Pick a consistent settle spot: Bed, mat, or favorite place where your dog will usually stay when you leave; use the least stressful setup (room, gate, or open crate only if your dog is already relaxed in it)^{[21][22]}.

Create a short pre-departure mini-routine: For example: potty → brief calm play or sniffing → scatter a few treats or give a chew if your dog can eat when relaxed → cue them to their settle spot → quietly move around the home. This becomes a safety pattern, not a "big event"^[22].

Practice "fake departures" inside: Walk to another room, close the door, sit for 5–30 seconds, then return and do something neutral like checking your phone. Vary duration; most reps should be easy so your dog stays under threshold^{[21][22]}. Work this into your day by working in your home office, making dinner, or doing some chores.

Watch your dog's body language with a camera: Progress only if they can stay relaxed or mildly curious (soft body, can eat, can lie down). If you see panting, pacing, continuous whining, frantic scratching, or intense door focus, shorten the step and make the next trial easier^{[21][22]}.

The goal is tons of "nothing bad happens when you walk away" reps, so the routine itself predicts safety, not panic.

Comforting, Affection, and Emotions: What Actually Reinforces Anxiety

A critical misunderstanding in separation anxiety management is the idea that comforting your dog *causes* or *reinforces* their anxiety. This is not supported by research. **You cannot reinforce an emotion like fear or panic the way you reinforce a behavior**^{[21][23]}.

Understanding Emotions vs. Behavior

Panic, fear, and anxiety are emotional states, not deliberate choices made because they are rewarded. They are not strengthened the same way behaviors like sit, stay and recall are strengthened^{[21][23]}.

Emotions drive behavior, not the other way around. In SRBs, the dog's vocalizing, destructive chewing, or frantic movement is a consequence of a high arousal emotional state; the dog is not "choosing" to be afraid because it leads to rewards^{[7][21]}.

Comfort can lower arousal and function as a safety signal. Calm touch, a soothing voice, or allowing the dog to be close to you can help the dog recover and may even reduce the intensity of future fear in similar situations, the opposite of worsening the problem^{[22][21]}.

What can be reinforced is specific behavior, not the underlying emotion. If you *always* return the second the dog barks during absence, the barking itself can become part of the behavior pattern that predicts your return. That is very different from "reinforcing fear"; the underlying anxiety remains unaddressed if you only chase quietness without changing how safe the dog feels^{[7][21]}.

Practical Implications for Your Dog

For dogs with transitional SRBs:

Providing comfort when your dog shows fear is welfare-appropriate. If your dog is scared during a storm or showing early signs of panic, calm contact, soothing tones, and close proximity can help regulate their nervous system ^{[21][22]}.

Allowing your dog on the bed, on furniture, or close to you will not cause separation anxiety. Many dogs who share beds and couches never develop separation problems. Removing these privileges does not reliably resolve SRBs when present ^{[22][6][17]}.

Comforting a panicked dog during absence practice is a safety decision. Stopping a dog from injuring themselves or cycling in extreme distress is more important than concerns about "rewarding" that distress. If your dog is in a panic episode during your practice, returning calmly is the right choice ^{[21][22]}.

Coming back while your dog vocalizes is sometimes necessary. If distress is escalating to dangerous levels (frantic escape attempts, self-injury), returning and calming your dog is a welfare decision. This does not "reinforce panic" it prevents harm ^[21].

Continuing to leave while a dog is panicking can worsen the condition. Repeated unmanaged panic episodes can increase anxiety over time. The key is managing the environment so panic is prevented during training, not leaving the dog to "cry it out" ^{[8][21]}.

What Actually Reinforces the Problem

The way to accidentally strengthen problem *behaviors* is through predictable patterns:

Practicing absences that are too long for your dog's current tolerance can create panic episodes that do reinforce anxiety: each time the dog panics and "survives," they learn "this is dangerous and I have to panic to survive it." This is why threshold management (keeping your dog under *their* threshold) is so critical ^{[8][21]}.

The solution is not to withhold comfort but to **pair comfort with gradual, successful exposures** so the dog's nervous system learns that separation itself is not dangerous.

Affection, Bed-Sharing, and Attachment Myths

Common rules like "no bed, no couch, ignore the dog when scared" are not supported as primary causes or cures for separation-related problems ^{[21][22][6][17]}.

Sleeping on the bed or sitting on furniture is not a causal factor for SRB; many dogs who share close contact never develop separation problems ^{[22][6]}.

Close affectionate bonding is not the problem. Research does not support a simple "too much love causes SRBs" story; the primary issue is how the dog *feels emotionally about separation*, not how much physical contact they have with you ^{[22][6][17]}.

Trying to shape "quiet" or "calm" without addressing the emotional state does not fix SRBs. A dog may appear still while remaining highly distressed internally. If your

focus is only on eliminating visible behavior rather than changing how the dog feels, the underlying anxiety remains active and will resurface ^{[21][7]}.

In other words: structure and boundaries can be useful for many reasons (manners, safety, predictability), but they do not replace a systematic plan to change how the dog *feels* about being apart.

Establishing Departure Routines

The goal is not to make departures "special." The goal is to make them predictable and help the dog settle in a safe place ^{[4][8]}. If you choose a designated safe zone for your dog to stay in alone, normalize spending time relaxing in this area outside of departures. This can begin with relaxing in this space together and then transitioning to spending time there alone but without the guardian actually leaving. (e.g. doing chores, working/hanging out in another room, etc.)

A simple pre-departure routine (2–7 minutes):

- Potty break
- 2–5 minutes of calm enrichment (sniffing, scatter feeding treats, kong or lick mat if your dog can eat when mildly anxious). *This should take place in the lead up to your departure to ease anticipatory stress and is **not** meant to distract from your exit.*
- Settle in the safest space (bed/mat, dog-proofed room, crate only if truly comfortable); For many dogs, the safest and most comfortable setup is likely to be left to free roam during absences.
- Do one normal cue (pickup keys from counter, shoes on), then depart.
- Post and pre departure, if you notice your dog gets up from their settle spot/safe place, walks around, sniffs the door, investigates a sound, appears to be waiting, etc., movement does not necessarily indicate panic.

You do not need to "ignore" your dog to prevent SRBs. Current evidence does not support greeting/departure intensity as a primary cause in newly adopted dogs ^[6]. Instead, aim for calm, matter-of-fact departures and returns.

Graduated Departures for Transitional SRBs

This is a starter plan for transitional SRBs. It is not the full protocol for true isolation distress or separation anxiety. If you see escalating distress (pacing, continuous barking, frantic scratching, drooling/panting that ramps up), the step was too hard. Make it easier next time.

Step 1: Micro-absences inside the home (1–10 seconds) 1-3 minutes between reps

Use the safest setup

Step out of sight briefly

Return before distress ramps

Repeat several times daily

Step 2: Short out-the-door reps (1–30 seconds) 1-3 minutes between reps

Ex. Get up and touch the door knob

Ex. Step out, step back in

Ex. Walk to the door and open/close

Randomize the above steps each time without creating patterns

Randomly mix durations out the door; keep reps easy (under 30 seconds)

Step 3: Build time slowly (30 seconds to a few minutes) 1-3 minutes between reps

Increase time out the door in small increments

Do not increase every repetition (*ex. 1:12, 00:34, 2:48, 00:55, 00:22, 1:45*)

Keep sessions short(10-20 mins); end on success

Step 4: Add pre-departure cues gradually 1-3 minutes between reps

Shoes/keys/jackets

Different exits

Car/garage sounds

Time-of-day changes

Why "slow and successful" matters: SRBs often start quickly after departure. Reviews using video show most problem behavior occurs within the first 10 minutes, with average time to vocalization in just a few minutes^[7]. Rushing this process will reset your progress.

When to Suspect True Alone-Time Isolation Distress

Reach out for help if you see:

- Distress starts quickly after you leave (often within minutes)
- Inability to settle despite time
- Intense escape behavior or self-injury risk
- Elimination specifically during absences
- The problem persists beyond the initial settling-in period (weeks)

Dogs with true isolation distress often need a structured plan (graduated exposure under threshold) and may benefit from coordinated veterinary care^[8].

Help from Austin Pets Alive!

If you believe your foster/adopted dog is experiencing true alone-time isolation distress or confinement anxiety, Austin Pets Alive! may be able to support you with SRB coaching and, when appropriate, referral to the on-staff Certified Separation Anxiety Trainer (CSAT).

Contact APA! Dog Behavior Follow Up: dogbehaviorfollowup@austinpetsalive.org

When you email, please include:

- Dog's name + ID (if available)
- Setup (crate/room/pen/free roam)
- How long until distress starts
- What distress looks like
- Video of the first 10–20 minutes alone including your departure routine (if you can safely get it)

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