

Separation anxiety isn't the only reason why a dog might become



Bored meeting

The phone rang. The voice at the end of the line sounded distressed. "Can you help? My dog is destroying the house. It is costing me a fortune. I think he's got separation anxiety."

The voice belonged to Nicky Johnson, the owner of Paddy, a typically friendly, boisterous young Labrador. Nicky had bought Paddy at the age of eight weeks and had no big problems with him as a puppy. Housetraining was easy, he did not chew too much, and he was a star at puppy classes. Nicky had a job that allowed her to work from home, so Paddy was not usually left alone for more than three hours each day. When left, he seemed relaxed and contented. All was going well.

Things changed when Nicky got a new job and could no longer work from home. Paddy was now left from 9am until 4pm, with Nicky popping home at lunchtime to let him out into the garden. Paddy was no longer an angel when left. Having never chewed before, he was becoming increasingly destructive and had caused more than £3,000 of damage. Neighbours began to complain that Paddy was barking when left, and they were considering reporting him to the council.

We booked a behaviour

consultation. I asked Nicky to get a vet referral to rule out any medical reason for the behaviour. Some detective work would also help. Firstly, Nicky should keep a diary, recording details of when Paddy was left alone, for how long and whether he was destructive. Secondly, she should ask the neighbours for more information about his barking. Finally, it would be helpful to leave a video camera running when she went out. All of this would give us an insight into Paddy's behaviour.

The day of the consultation arrived. Using COAPE's emotional, mood state and reinforcement analysis (EMRA) approach, I set about working out what was causing Paddy's barking and chewing. I looked at how content Paddy was feeling generally, how he felt when he was being destructive and why his behaviour was gradually getting worse. It would have been easy to jump to the conclusion that he had separation anxiety, but I needed to rule out other causes.

Nicky did a great job of keeping a diary. It proved to be critical in helping us, as it identified a pattern in Paddy's behaviour. He was rarely destructive in the morning or at the weekend. Most of the chewing happened in the

afternoon. The neighbours added a valuable insight, reporting that he barked most in the afternoon and rarely in the morning. Unfortunately, Nicky's video camera had been chewed by Paddy a couple of weeks previously, so there was no video footage!

All of this was making me think that maybe Paddy did not have separation anxiety. Dogs with separation anxiety often show signs of distress every time they are left. Paddy, however, was sometimes left without chewing or barking. Another common sign of separation anxiety is that the dog becomes anxious while the owners get ready to go out. Often the owners will then come home to find the dog wide awake and hysterical with excitement to see them. Paddy, however, was calm while Nicky prepared to go out. When she returned home, he would often be fast asleep. Paddy was always delighted to see her on her return, but showed no signs of having been unduly distressed.

So separation anxiety was looking unlikely. Maybe his behaviour was caused by boredom. I needed to know more about a day in the life of Paddy. Nicky talked me through the diary in more detail. During the week, Paddy had a short

walk in the morning and in the evening. Nicky came home briefly at lunchtime to let him out in the garden. Paddy was kept on the lead during the week. This was because, when let off the lead, he would hurtle round the park at a rate of knots, playing with anyone or anything that crossed his path. He would not come when called and it could take an hour to catch him. At weekends, Nicky took him for long off-lead walks so he could let off some steam.

Throughout the consultation, Paddy had been very lively. He alternated between pestering us for cuddles and throwing his toys around the room. Nicky said that his general mood state was always excited and playful until he had been taken for a walk. After a long walk, he would settle down to sleep for the rest of the day. He had not been walked before the consultation and was therefore bursting with energy.

I was now convinced that we were not dealing with separation anxiety. Instead Paddy's destructive behaviour was caused by a lack of exercise and mental stimulation. Chewing and barking provided an emotional release for his boredom and frustration. We needed to change the balance of his day to provide him with more stimulation, both mental and physical. This would be done as follows.

Changing the walking routine

Exercising Paddy for longer in the morning would tire him out and make him less likely to chew for entertainment during the day. Paddy should therefore be taken for a long walk before work. Nicky should come home for longer at lunchtime, to take Paddy for a short walk rather than just letting him out in the garden. He should then have another quick walk in the evening.

Changing the feeding routine

Prior to the consultation Paddy was fed once a day, in the

destructive when left home alone...

evening. Research has shown that this can contribute to changes in behaviour, as blood sugar levels fluctuate from one extreme to another. As well as feeling hungry by the afternoon, his blood sugar levels will have dropped, thus making him less tolerant of being left alone with nothing to do. Changing his feeding routine to twice a day would help to keep his blood sugar levels more stable. This would also give us a chance to provide mental stimulation by making Paddy work for his food.

From now on, Paddy would be fed twice a day. Breakfast would be split between two food toys, such as a well-stuffed Kong and a Dog Pyramid. Nicky would leave one for Paddy when she left for work. The other food toy would be given when he was left in the afternoon. Dinner would be given in a bowl as usual. To avoid over-feeding him, his food should be weighed out in the morning based on the feeding guidelines on the bag.

Teaching Paddy to chew only on his own toys

Paddy should be given lots of safe toys to chew on. This would help to keep him entertained and reduce the temptation to chew on other items. To limit the number of household objects available to him, he should be restricted to the kitchen when left rather than having the run of the house. Counters should be cleared of tempting items to prevent counter-surfing! The aim of this was to try to break Paddy's habit of destroying Nicky's belongings and to teach him to chew on his own toys instead.

Teaching Paddy to come when he is called

I showed Nicky how to teach Paddy to come when called. It

is important for dogs to learn that it is more fun to return to their owner than ignore them. Making Nicky more fun than the environment was the key to teaching Paddy to return to her. Improving Paddy's recall would make Nicky feel more confident about letting him off the lead. Paddy could then tire himself out by chasing balls and playing with other dogs, provided their owners were happy to let this happen. All this will make him more likely to sleep when left alone later. Initially, Paddy should be walked using a long training line. This would give him more freedom than a standard lead while also preventing him running off.

A month later, Nicky reported that Paddy's behaviour had improved dramatically. His destructive behaviour had reduced significantly, and in the last week he had not chewed anything inappropriate. The neighbours said that Paddy was barking less and they were no longer planning to report him to the council. Nicky was working hard on Paddy's recall training and was making good progress. She was still using the long line on her morning walks, but was gradually getting more confident that he would come when called if he was playing with another dog. Finally, she said that Paddy seemed generally happier than he had been previously.

This was a pleasing outcome to what initially appeared to be a complex case. Simple solutions such as increased exercise and a different feeding routine should not be underestimated when dealing with behaviour problems. Small changes can make a big difference in some cases. ■



Clare Atkinson offers one-to-one dog training, group classes and behaviour consultations across Hertfordshire and Bedfordshire. She achieved her COAPE diploma in 2006 and is currently a CAPBT committee member. She is also a member of the Association of Pet Dog Trainers (00985).

Prior to setting up The Family Dog, Clare spent several years working for a major pet food manufacturer. She has also worked as a volunteer at both Battersea Dogs and Cats Home and at a Blue Cross adoption centre. She has had a lifetime of experience with a variety of animals, including dogs, horses, rabbits and parrots. The current dog in her life is an eight-year-old rescue spaniel cross.



Website: www.thefamilydog.co.uk
Email: behaviour@thefamilydog.co.uk
Telephone: 01582 871277



Clare Atkinson
BA, MEng, DipCAPBT, MAPDT985

COAPE Association of Pet Behaviourists and Trainers
www.capbt.org e-mail: pethelp@capbt.org

