

Calm When I'M GONE

Back soon!
♡

Oh, you left?
I didn't notice.

A step-by-step guide to
helping your dog handle alone time



DOG PARENT LIFE



YOU'RE NOT A BAD DOG PARENT.

Maybe your neighbor sent another polite message about the howling. Maybe you came home to a scratched door, a puddle, or the remains of something you were rather attached to. Maybe you watched your dog on a camera and turned the car around before you reached the end of the street.

Whatever brought you here, I'm glad you came looking for a better way.

A damaged door tells you where something happened. It doesn't tell you what your dog was feeling, or when it started. This guide helps you find out, make today easier, and build alone time in steps small enough for your dog to handle.

We'll make room for real life, too: jobs, appointments, budgets, and mornings when you're tired before breakfast. You don't have to prove you love your dog by never leaving the house. You need a starting point, some backup, and a way to tell what's helping.

Let's start with what happens on the other side of the door.

Elin & Frost

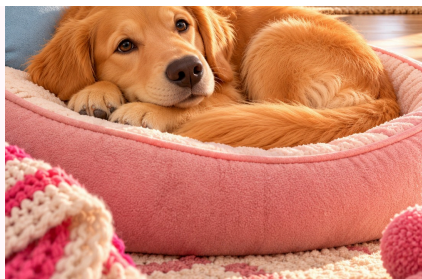
ABOUT ELIN

I grew up with family dogs, worked for years in a busy grooming salon and dog daycare in my twenties, and have fostered dogs of many breeds. My current husky, Frost, has strong opinions about everything. I'm not a veterinarian, certified trainer, or behaviorist; the numbered sources at the back are the published guidance behind the facts in this book.

This guide is for general education and doesn't replace advice from your veterinarian or a qualified behavior professional. Contact your vet for injuries, escape attempts, sudden behavior changes, or possible pain or illness. Injury or immediate danger needs prompt veterinary care. The stories illustrate the ideas; your dog's response sets the pace.

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BEFORE YOUR NEXT ABSENCE: 3 THINGS THAT HELP RIGHT AWAY



The goal: a dog who can rest while you're out. You'll get there in small steps.

You don't need to fix alone time before tomorrow. You do need tomorrow to go a little better. Start with these three.

- 1. Cover the next absence you can't avoid.** Line up company for it: a friend, a family member, a sitter, or a daycare your dog already knows. **Why:** every overwhelming absence is practice at panicking. Covering the hard ones gives training room to work.^{[4][8]}
- 2. Get one honest look at what happens.** If you already have camera footage, watch it from the moment you leave. If you don't, film two minutes of your dog relaxing while you're home, so you know what “comfortable” looks like for them. Don't stage a stressful departure just to record it. **Why:** real clues beat guesses from the damage.^[3]
- 3. Keep goodbyes and hellos calm and predictable.** Same short routine every time, no big speeches, and no scolding for whatever you find when you get home. **Why:** predictable departures are easier to cope with, and punishment adds fear to a dog who's already struggling.^{[1][4]}

RED FLAG: CALL YOUR VET

If your dog hurts themselves, breaks through windows or crates, or panics so hard they can't settle when you return, skip ahead to Chapter 9 and call your vet. Don't repeat that absence while you wait for help.^[4]

That's your head start. Now let's work out what's really going on, so you can fix the right thing.

HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

Read Chapters 1 and 2 first. They help you describe what's happening before you pick a plan. Then use the chapter that fits your situation. You don't need to do everything in this book, and you don't need an expensive camera or a perfect notebook. Your phone is plenty.

Safety comes first. If your dog is injuring themselves or trying to escape, go straight to Chapter 9.

ELIN'S TIP

A practical detail that makes the work easier.

TRY THIS

One small action with clear steps. Most have a matching worksheet at the back.

RED FLAG: CALL YOUR VET

A health or safety concern that comes before any training exercise.

MYTH VS. FACT

Popular advice, checked against the evidence, with something better to do instead.

The 30-day plan in Chapter 10 organizes your first month. Some dogs move quickly; many need longer. Go at your dog's pace, not the calendar's.^[3]

The six worksheets at the back are yours to print and reuse. Numbers in brackets point to the sources at the back.

A CALMER STARTING POINT

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WHAT'S ACTUALLY HAPPENING WHEN YOU LEAVE?

Start with what you can see, not a guess based on the damage.



You come home to one destroyed sneaker. Just the left one. Apparently, the right one had nothing to contribute.

Your dog greets you, you look at the shoe, and someone offers an explanation: “He’s mad you left.”

I’d rather start with a better question: **what happened before the chewing?**

Was your dog resting, then looking for something to do? Did they start pacing while you put your shoes on? Did a delivery truck pull up? Were they scratching at a closed gate before they found the sneaker? Each answer points to a different fix.^[2]

People call almost anything a dog does home alone “separation anxiety.” In this book I use a broader term, **separation-related problems**, because it leaves room to find out what’s really going on.

Six common patterns

These are clues, not diagnoses, and more than one can apply to the same dog.^{[4][11]}

Possible pattern	What you might see	What to look into
Missing one particular person	Struggles when that person leaves, even if someone else is home	Whether another caregiver helps enough
Being alone	Struggles without any human company; fine with a familiar caregiver	Whether company can cover the absences you can't avoid
Boredom or unmet needs	Exploring, scavenging, or chewing without signs of panic	Daily activity, chewing outlets, how the house is set up
Toilet access or housetraining	Accidents in other situations too, or after too long without a break	Access, training history, possible health causes
Noise fear or alarm barking	Reaction starts after traffic, thunder, or building noise	The trigger, and how your dog reacts to it when you're home
Confinement stress	Trouble specifically around a crate, closed room, or gate	Whether the confinement itself is part of the problem

Separation anxiety or isolation distress?

A useful question is whether your dog struggles without *you*, or without *anyone*. You don't need to settle the label today; even professionals disagree on the terms.^[2] Write down what you see instead: “She paced when I left, even though my partner stayed home.” Or: “She napped next to my sister the whole time.” Notes like these are far more useful than the perfect label.

ELIN'S TIP

Ask everyone at home to jot a quick note when they leave and come back: time, who left, and anything they noticed. Patterns show up fast when the whole household is collecting clues.

RED FLAG: CALL YOUR VET

New accidents in a dog who was reliably housetrained, or any sudden change in behavior, can have a medical cause. Check with your vet before starting a training plan.^{[6][11]}

The shoe might need a different plan

Biscuit, the Golden Retriever I grew up with, considered socks a perfectly respectable hobby. Finding one in his mouth told us he liked socks. It told us nothing about how he felt about an empty house. Once we kept the laundry out of reach and gave him real chews, most of the “evidence” disappeared, because he'd never been upset in the first place.

A dog who simply needs more to do will do better with chew toys, activity, and a safely arranged space. Those are good changes either way, but they won't fix true distress about being alone.^[7]

MYTH VS. FACT

Myth: Damage means separation anxiety.

Fact: Damage is a reason to investigate. When it happens, and what your dog does before and after, tells you what it means.^{[2][7]}

Which plan fits your dog?

1. **Danger or health changes?** Injuries, dangerous escapes, new accidents, or sudden changes go to your vet first.^{[4][6]}
2. **Linked to you leaving?** Use the coverage plan (Chapter 4) and the small-absence plan (Chapter 5). Get professional help for strong distress.
3. **A specific trigger?** If the trouble starts with a noise or a barrier, work on that trigger. Longer absences won't fix it.
4. **Everyday needs?** If footage shows a relaxed dog who later chews or needs the toilet, adjust activity, chews, and toilet breaks.

More than one route can apply. Start with the one causing the most trouble.

TRY THIS

Write down one incident. What happened, when you found it, what you know, and what you don't. “Scratched the front door; found after 40 minutes; no footage; don't know when it started” is a perfect first note. Leave out guesses about motives.

Become YOUR DOG'S DETECTIVE

Collect real clues without putting your dog through a stressful test.



When I first fostered Mabel, a scruffy little terrier mix, I came home to a shredded doormat and assumed she couldn't stand being alone. Then I watched the camera. She napped happily for twenty minutes. The moment the neighbor's garage door rumbled up, she shot to the front door and went to work on the mat.

It wasn't my leaving that set her off. It was that noise. So we worked on the garage door instead, and the doormat survived the rest of her stay.

A camera shows you what you'd otherwise miss, because the important part happens after you've gone.^[3] Think of it as a notebook with a lens, not an endurance test.

1 • Set up the view

A pet camera, an old phone, or a laptop all work. Get the resting area and the door or gate in the shot, turn the sound on, and keep cables out of reach. If your dog wanders out of view, write “out of view,” not “calm.”



A good camera view shows where your dog rests and the door they'd head for.

2 · Film ordinary life first

Record a few minutes while you're home. How does your dog rest, shift position, glance at sounds, and move around? That's their personal “comfortable” to compare against later.^[5]

3 · Watch a departure only if it's safe

If you already know your dog panics the moment you leave, don't do it again just to film it. The footage and notes you have are enough to show a professional.

If you expect a short departure to go fine, watch it live and stay close enough to come straight back. Keep it within what your dog has already shown they can handle. Not sure what that is? Start with something smaller while you're still inside: standing up, walking toward the door, or picking up your keys.

The rule behind all of this is simple: practice at a level that doesn't scare your dog, then build up slowly.^[5]

RED FLAG: CALL YOUR VET

If your dog tries a dangerous escape or could hurt themselves, stop and go back in. Don't wait for a clearer recording. Injuries or immediate danger need urgent veterinary help.^[4]

4 · Write down the sequence

Note what happened, in order: “Resting on rug. Door closed. Stood up. Walked to door. Paced between door and window. Started whining. I came back in.” Add the time, any outside sounds, who was home, and whether a door or gate was closed.



Compare your dog with their own relaxed self. One posture on its own doesn't tell you much.

5 · Watch the whole dog

Signs of distress include pacing, barking or howling, trembling, drooling, accidents, and escape attempts. Look at them together; no single one tells the whole story.^[3] Food is a clue too. A dog who eats isn't automatically calm, and one skipped treat isn't a crisis.

Score	What you see	What to do next
0 · Comfortable	Looks like their normal relaxed self	Note how long, and what was going on
1 · Unsure	Something changed; you're not sure what it means	Make the next practice easier
2 · Distressed	Pacing, whining, or can't settle, and it keeps going or builds	End the practice and rethink
3 · Unsafe	Self-injury or a dangerous escape attempt	Stop, make it safe, call your vet

Use the score to keep your notes consistent, and always write down the most worrying thing you saw, even if the rest went well.

If distress starts, go back in calmly. Don't wait outside for the barking to stop. Waiting it out is a form of flooding, and that can make fear worse.^[5] If you can't tell what the footage means, share a short clip with a qualified professional.^{[3][14]}

TRY THIS

Set up your camera and record two minutes of your dog relaxing while you're home. Notice how they lie, move, and react to sounds. You don't need to leave for this one.

WHY THIS STARTED

Understand what might be behind it, without blaming yourself or your dog's past.



Same house. Same schedule. Same spot where you leave your shoes. But your dog has changed. Maybe they follow you from room to room now, or a neighbor mentions barking that never used to happen. Maybe it started after a move, an adoption, or your return to the office.

Gus, a senior dachshund regular at the salon, suddenly started crying when his family went out in the evenings. His owner asked me for a training plan. I suggested a vet visit first, plus notes on when the crying started and what else had changed. Older dogs can have pain, sensory changes, or confusion that looks like a behavior problem, and the plan made a lot more sense once those questions were answered.^[6]

Sometimes there's one clear trigger. Often several things overlap, and you'll never pinpoint exactly how it began. That's okay; research has found possible risk factors, but none of them proves the cause for one particular dog.^[3] And please don't write a whole tragic backstory from one behavior. "She scratches the door, so she must have been abandoned" is a guess. You can record when she scratches and work on what helps.

What might be part of the picture?

Temperament and genes. Genetics, early experiences, and learning all shape behavior. Breed alone won't tell you why your dog struggles or what will help.^[14]

Routine changes. Going from lots of company to longer absences, a new home, or someone moving in or out can all matter.^[4]

Rehoming and past experiences. History gives context, but it can't tell you what your dog remembers, and the research on these risk factors is mixed.^[3]

Physical health. Pain, urinary problems, changes in sight or hearing, and cognitive changes in older dogs can all show up as behavior changes.^{[6][11]}

Build a before-and-after timeline

- 1. Find the last normal week.** What did alone time look like? Without a camera, write “seemed fine,” not “was calm.”
- 2. List every change.** New schedules, moves, visitors, construction, a new crate, or a scary event. Note changes in sleep, appetite, thirst, movement, or toilet habits too.
- 3. Separate facts from guesses.** “I started working at the office on June 3” is a fact. “He thinks I'm never coming back” is a guess.
- 4. Share it.** Your vet checks the health side. A qualified behavior professional uses the rest to plan.^[14]

RED FLAG: CALL YOUR VET

New accidents, confusion, or changed sleep in an older dog need a vet visit, not just a new departure routine.^[6]

TRY THIS

Write down when you first noticed the problem, your routine before it, what changed, any other changes in your dog, and your biggest question. If nothing obvious changed, write that. You don't need an origin story to start getting help.

MAKE TODAY MANAGEABLE

Cover the absences you can't avoid while training catches up.



You have an appointment at ten. Your dog struggles with absences far shorter than that. “Only leave for as long as your dog can handle” sounds sensible, right up until you look at your calendar.

That's where **management** comes in: changing the situation so your dog isn't pushed past what they can cope with while you train. It doesn't replace training. It protects it. ^[8]

Juno, a nervous rescue pit mix from our daycare, couldn't handle more than a few minutes alone when her family adopted her. They didn't try to tough it out. A neighbor covered two mornings a week, Juno came to daycare on the long days, and her owner did tiny practice sessions on the weekends. It wasn't glamorous, but it meant Juno almost never had to face a long, scary day alone while she was learning.

Start with the actual gap

List every absence you can't avoid this week, including travel time. A one-hour appointment might really need ninety minutes of cover. A sitter arriving at ten doesn't help if you leave at nine-thirty. Then split the list into what you can move and what you can't.

Company helps many dogs, but check that it helps yours before you rely on it. ^[4]



Try out a caregiver while you're still home, before you rely on them for a real absence.

Option	Why it helps	What to check
Friend or family	Familiar company; often free	Are they available, and will they follow your plan?
In-home sitter	Your dog stays in familiar surroundings	Cost; whether they step out during the booking
Care in another home	Can cover longer stretches	Is your dog comfortable there? Other animals? Escape-proofing?
Daycare	Reliable, scheduled care	Is it right for your dog? Rest time, supervision
Bring your dog along	Skips the absence entirely	Safe transport and a dog-friendly destination
Staggered schedules	Can cut paid care	Is it realistic for your household?

Try it out first. Have the caregiver visit while you're home and walk them through the routine and the way in and out. Then step out briefly and ask them what they saw. If your dog gets upset, end the trial and adjust.^{[3][4]}

Ask daycares good questions: how they decide a dog is a good fit, how they build in rest, how they supervise, what they do when a dog is stressed, and how they handle dogs. Choose a place that uses humane, reward-based methods.^{[1][13]}

If you can't cover everything, tell your vet or trainer the exact gap and your budget. Use the safest arrangement your dog already handles, keep someone reachable, and don't introduce a crate or closed room for the first time in an emergency. A camera can show you a problem, but it can't help your dog.^[4]

TRY THIS

Plan your next unavoidable absence: write down when you leave and when you'll be back, confirm your first-choice cover, and name a backup. Management is part of the plan, not cheating.

THE SMALL-ABSENCE PLAN

Practice goodbyes your dog can handle, then build from what you see.



You're standing by the front door, hand on the handle, wondering if this really counts as training. It does.

Maple, an Aussie mix I fostered, would leap up the moment my hand touched that handle. So that's where we started: touch the handle, let go, go back to the couch. Over a few weeks, she went from watching me like a hawk to barely lifting her head. Eventually she could stay on her rug while I stepped outside and closed the door for a few seconds. Longer absences still had company, but we finally had real progress to build on.

The method is called **gradual desensitization**: practicing a small, easy version of something hard, and making it harder only as your dog stays comfortable. ^[3]^[5]

“Comfortable” means relaxed by your dog's own normal, not just quiet. A dog lying silent but staring at the door, or worn out from barking, isn't comfortable. Silence alone doesn't tell you enough. ^[3]

You're not trying to find out how long your dog can survive alone. You're picking a step they can handle and watching how it goes.



A small action at the door is a perfectly good place to start. Real absences come later.

Before you begin

Pick a time when your dog is relaxed and has had their walk, meal, and toilet break. Have your camera running and your log handy, and make sure you can stop at any moment.

If your dog is already stressed, wait for another day. If even tiny steps cause panic, or your dog tries dangerous escapes, get professional help before going further. ^[4]^[14]

1 • Find an easy starting step

Make a list of everything you do before leaving: standing up, walking toward the door, touching the handle, opening the door a crack, standing in the doorway, stepping outside, closing the door briefly.

Every dog reacts to different cues. Yours may ignore the handle and panic at your bag. Pick one step you expect to be easy, do it once, then go back to normal life. Note how your dog reacted.

If it worried them, make it smaller next time: reach halfway toward the handle, or stay farther from the door. Don't keep repeating a step that upsets your dog in the hope they'll "get used to it."

2 • Check before you repeat

A glance or a relaxed stroll after you isn't failure, and lying down isn't automatically calm. Compare what you saw with your dog's relaxed baseline. If you're not sure, make the next step easier. ^[3]^[14]

ELIN'S TIP

Write "touched handle without turning it," not just "door practice." Tomorrow's tired version of you needs instructions you can actually repeat.



A relaxed dog matters more than a bigger number on the stopwatch.

3 • Add a real absence when you're ready

Once your departure routine is no big deal, add a very short real absence. For some dogs that's one second outside the door; others already handle a few minutes. Come back while your dog is still relaxed, then let things settle before the next one. Don't wait for distress to tell you it's time to come back. ^[4]^[5]

Example, adjust to your dog: if your dog is relaxed with three-second absences, a session might be 1 second, 2 seconds, 2 seconds, then 3 seconds. Mixing in easier ones keeps it comfortable. Not every repetition needs to be harder than the last.

4 • Repeat, make it easier, or move up

Repeat when it went well and you want to be sure. **Make it easier** when you see any worry or you're not sure. **Move up a little** only after several relaxed repetitions.

Change one thing at a time. Don't make the absence longer *and* use a different door *and* close a gate on the same day. There's no magic percentage to add each time; let your dog's reactions decide. ^[3]

How long should a session be?

Set aside five to ten minutes, including pauses and notes. You may only use a couple of minutes. Start with a few easy repetitions, and let your dog fully relax between them.

Stop early if your dog gets more watchful, seems less relaxed, something interrupts you, or you feel the urge to rush. Your dog doesn't owe you the rest of the session, and more repetitions aren't automatically better.

ELIN'S TIP

Set a timer on your phone before you step out, and come back when it goes off, not when you feel like it. It keeps you honest on the days you're tempted to push "just a bit longer."

Should you use food?

Pairing a step with something delicious, called **counterconditioning**, can help some dogs feel better about it. ^{[3][5]} Try the chew or food toy while you're home first, and keep watching after the food runs out. A puzzle that takes twenty minutes to finish doesn't mean your dog can handle twenty minutes alone. ^[4]

When something goes wrong

“My dog got upset before I even left.” End the session. Next time, start with an earlier, easier step. If departure cues set them off, Chapter 6 is for you. If the tiniest steps still cause real distress, get professional help.

“My dog started barking once I was outside.” Go back in calmly, right away. Don't wait for quiet. Write down how long it took and the first sign, then make the next session easier. ^[5]

“Yesterday went great. Today didn't.” That's normal. Check for new noises, visitors, or a change in routine, and drop back to an easier step. For sudden or lasting changes, check with your vet. ^[6]

“My dog follows me everywhere.” Look at how. A loose, easy stroll after you is very different from pacing and whining. Don't punish following or force a “stay” to hide it. ^{[1][3]}

“One session went well. Can I run errands now?” Not yet. One good session doesn't mean your dog can handle a longer or different absence. Keep errands covered while you build consistent success. ^[4]

QUICK RECAP

Start with a step your dog can handle. Watch the whole time. Repeat, make it easier, or move up based on what you see. Cover any absence longer than your dog can manage.

What progress looks like

Your dog keeps napping when you pick up your keys. They seem less worried at the same short absence. Good sessions start to stack up. A departure cue becomes boring. Then, slowly, comfortable absences get longer. A bigger number only counts if your dog is relaxed at it.



After a hard day, go back to an easier step. You don't need to make up for missed practice.

After an absence that went badly

Deal with the moment first. Make sure your dog is safe, and call your vet about any injury. Don't punish damage, and skip training that evening.^[1]

Then write down what you know, look at why the absence wasn't covered, and restart at an easier step once your dog is relaxed again. If hard absences keep happening, share your notes with your vet or a behavior professional.

Make the next session easy to repeat

Write your starting step down *before* you begin, including the room, who's home, and whether any door or gate is open or closed. Keep your notebook where you'll see it when you come back in. Decide in advance which smaller step you'll use if the first one is too hard.

Planning ahead stops you from making rushed decisions while you're watching a live camera, and it makes your notes much more useful to anyone helping you. If your plan and your dog disagree, your dog wins. Change the plan.

ELIN'S TIP

Celebrate the boring sessions. A practice where absolutely nothing happens is exactly what success looks like.

TRY THIS

Write your first practice card. My dog's relaxed baseline looks like: _____. The small step I'll practice: _____. An easier version: _____. I'll stop if I see: _____. I'll cover longer absences by: _____. Pick a step you're confident will be easy. One clearly relaxed moment is a great start.

MAKE KEYS, SHOES, AND BAGS BORING

Work on the signals that tell your dog you're about to leave.



You haven't left. You haven't even reached the door. You picked up your bag, and now your dog is watching your every move.

Frost is a professional at this. I can pick up my keys as casually as I like, and he's already filed a formal objection. Once a husky starts inspecting your plans, “just getting ready” turns into a job interview.

Many dogs start to worry during the things that come before an absence: keys, shoes, a jacket, or a whole sequence of steps. These are called **departure cues**.^[4] Which ones matter to your dog?

Write down what you do and what your dog does next: “Shoes: keeps resting. Bag: stands and watches. Walk to door: follows. Handle: whines.” Standing up on its own isn't distress, so look at the whole sequence. If your dog stays relaxed until you actually leave, you can skip this chapter.

There are two ways to make cues boring: show the cue without leaving afterward, and pair a mild version of it with something your dog loves (counterconditioning). Neither one means repeating a cue until your dog gives up reacting.^[5]



Bring out your bag and shoes during ordinary time at home, with no absence afterward.

A simple cue-practice routine

1. **Pick one cue that matters.** Start with the easiest version. Touching your bag strap is easier than lifting the bag; moving your keys gently is easier than jingling them.
2. **Do less than you think you need.** Do it once, then go back to what you were doing. Did your dog settle back down? If they seemed worried, make it smaller next time.
3. **Keep it ordinary.** One or two easy repetitions, with normal life in between, is plenty to start. Stop if your dog gets more watchful.
4. **Add food if it helps.** If you're using counterconditioning, keep the cue mild and follow it with a treat while your dog stays relaxed. Taking a treat doesn't cancel out other signs of worry.^{[3][5]}
5. **Put the pieces back together.** Try shoes then sit at your desk, or bag then sit on the sofa. Later, run through your full routine without leaving. Easy cue practice alone doesn't mean your dog is ready for a long absence.^[4]

If your dog starts watching everything

Take a break. Ask yourself whether practice has been too intense or too frequent, or whether a cue keeps being followed by a hard absence. Go back to an easier version once your dog is relaxed, and get help if the worry continues.

ELIN'S TIP

Don't turn every moment at home into training. Pick one small task, note how it went, and get on with your day.

TRY THIS

Write out your leaving routine in order. Circle the first step where your dog's behavior changes. Then write a smaller version of that step. That's your starting point.

TOOLS THAT CAN HELP

Choose supports that earn their place, without expecting a product to fix panic.



You bought the puzzle toy, filled it carefully, and read reviews from people whose dogs apparently became peaceful little philosophers after one use. Your dog ignored it until you got home.

That's useful information. Many dogs who are distressed when alone won't eat until their person is back.^[4] It doesn't mean you need a fancier toy.

At the daycare, the dogs who struggled most at drop-off often left their breakfast untouched until pickup, no matter how good it was. Food can help a dog who's mostly fine. It rarely reaches a dog who's truly worried.

I want your tools to earn their place by helping your dog, not by adding to your shopping list.

Exercise, sniffing, and enrichment

The right amount of activity and mental work meets your dog's everyday needs, especially if they haven't been getting enough. It won't cure separation distress on its own.^{[3][7]}

Try this order before a practice session: a familiar activity your dog enjoys, time to settle afterward, a toilet break, and then practice once they're relaxed. Aim for a satisfied dog, not an exhausted one.



A sniffy walk your dog enjoys, then time to settle, is a great warm-up for practice.

Food puzzles and chews

Good fit: your dog enjoys it, uses it safely, and stays relaxed. **What it does:** gives them something good to do, and can support counterconditioning. **Watch out:** it doesn't prove an absence is going well, and it can hide what happens once the food runs out. ^[3]^[4]

1. Introduce it while you're home, and check it doesn't frustrate your dog.
2. Use it during an easy departure practice.
3. Watch your dog while they eat, and after the food is gone.
4. Make the practice easier if you see any worry.

Supervise any new chew or toy until you know how your dog uses it. Ask your vet if you have questions about swallowing, teeth, or diet.

A comfortable room, gate, or crate

Good fit: your dog is already relaxed there. **What it does:** a familiar resting spot and protection from hazards. **Watch out:** being shut in can add to distress, and a dog who's fine in a crate while you're home may not be fine when you're gone. ^[4]^[6]

Start in a spot your dog already rests in. Try closing a gate or door while you're nearby, then build separation in small steps. If confinement makes things worse, choose another setup. Never keep using a crate that your dog frantically tries to escape; stop and call your vet if there's any risk of injury. ^[4]



A crate is optional. Use whatever safe setup your dog is already comfortable with.

Music and white noise

Research on music for dogs is promising in some stressful settings, like shelters, but it hasn't been shown to treat separation problems at home, and dogs respond differently.^[10] White noise to soften outside sounds is a separate idea worth testing on its own.

Good fit: a simple, low-cost thing to try. **Watch out:** it may do nothing, or your dog may not like it. Try it quietly while you're home first, then during an easy practice. Stop if your dog seems less relaxed, and never turn it up to drown out barking.

Cameras and remote features

A camera measures; it doesn't treat.^[3] Check the view and the connection. Test treat dispensers and speakers while you're home rather than assuming a voice from a box will comfort your dog. For early practice, you can leave those features off and simply watch.

Supplements and calming products

Evidence varies a lot from product to product, and none of them replaces a training plan.^{[3][5]} Before buying, ask your vet: is there evidence this helps with this problem? What should I expect? Could it interact with anything my dog takes? How will I know it's working?

How to judge a tool fairly

Write down the setup, the practice, and how your dog behaved. Change one thing at a time so you can tell what made the difference. Don't take away something your dog relies on just to test it; keep practice comfortable.

ELIN'S TIP

If your dog only eats after you get home, write it down. That's a clue, not a reason to buy fancier treats.

TRY THIS

Pick one tool you already own and give it a specific job, like “give him something to chew” or “let me see the front door.” Decide how you'll know it's helping. If its job is “fix the anxiety,” get more specific before you spend any money.

ADVICE YOU CAN STOP FOLLOWING

Swap guilt and harsh advice for things that actually help.



You mention the problem to five people. One says ignore your dog. Another says make a bigger fuss. Someone recommends a bark collar. Someone else says you've been too affectionate. By dinner, you have five conflicting plans and a headache.

I heard every one of these at the salon. Here's what the evidence says instead.

MYTH VS. FACT

Myth: "Your dog is getting revenge."

Fact: Dogs who damage things alone aren't being spiteful; several causes can look alike.^[2] Clean up without scolding, check your footage, and follow the matching plan.

MYTH VS. FACT

Myth: "Let your dog cry until they learn."

Fact: Leaving a scared dog to face something overwhelming can make fear worse. That's flooding, not training.^[5]

Instead: end practice when distress starts, note the first sign, pick an easier step, and cover longer absences. If no step feels easy enough, get professional help. You never need to wait for silence while your dog struggles.

“A bark collar will fix it.”

Punishing the noise doesn't fix the panic underneath it. The American Veterinary Society of Animal Behavior recommends reward-based methods and advises against aversive ones.^{[1][12]} Skip shock, spray, and vibration collars and any kind of punishment. Instead, figure out what comes before the barking (leaving, a noise, being shut in) and work on that. Temporary cover can give the neighbors relief while you train.

“You caused this by loving your dog too much.”

The research doesn't support blaming ordinary affection for one dog's problem.^[3] Keep cuddles, play, and attention. Focus on your departure routine instead. You don't need to withhold love to prove you're serious.

“Never say goodbye. Ignore your dog when you get home.”

One small study found dogs were calmer after being petted before a short separation, but it only looked at ten dogs without separation problems.^[9] It doesn't make a rule either way. Keep departures short and predictable. If a quiet touch or phrase suits your dog, use it; if it becomes a worry cue, drop it. And when you come home to a distressed dog, help them. Greeting rules are never a reason to ignore distress.

“Just get another dog.”

A second pet isn't a proven fix for a dog who misses *you*, and research hasn't found other pets to be reliably protective.^[3] Some dogs do settle better with company, so test that carefully. Please don't adopt a second dog as an experiment.

“Every day has to be longer than the last.”

Let your dog's behavior set the pace, not the calendar. Start easy, repeat to be sure, make it easier when you see worry, and move up only when your dog is relaxed.^[5]

TRY THIS

Swap one stressful rule for an action. Instead of “don't go back in until the barking stops,” write “keep practice easy; if distress starts, go back in calmly and make the next step easier.” When someone gives you advice, ask what you should watch for, and what to do if things get worse.

When you need more help

Who to call, what to bring, and what to ask.



You've moved the camera, rearranged your schedule, and practiced the smallest departure you could think of, and your dog still struggles. Or you haven't started at all, because what you're seeing already looks frightening.

You don't have to finish every exercise before asking for help. A vet and a qualified behavior professional can be part of your plan from day one. ^[4]^[14]

One daycare family I knew spent months trying everything on their own before they finally booked a veterinary behaviorist. They told me afterward their only regret was waiting so long. The plan they got was built around their schedule, and for the first time they felt like they knew what to do next.

Start with your vet

Behavior and physical health overlap. Describe the problem plainly: "My dog scratches and bites the door when I leave. I have a short video. I'd like to rule out health problems and talk about a behavior plan." Mention any changes in appetite, toilet habits, sleep, or movement. ^[6]^[14]

RED FLAG: CALL YOUR VET

Self-injury, dangerous escape attempts through windows or crates, getting trapped, or distress you can't safely manage all need help now. Injuries or immediate danger may need emergency care. Don't repeat the absence just to get better footage. ^[4]



Bring a short clip, your timeline, your schedule limits, and your biggest question.

Professional	What they offer
Your regular vet	Medical checkup, treatment, follow-up, and referrals
Board-certified veterinary behaviorist	A vet specialist who handles both the medical and behavior sides
Certified Applied Animal Behaviorist	Advanced behavior qualifications; works alongside your vet
Trainer or consultant experienced with separation problems	Hands-on coaching with humane methods, video review, and teamwork with your vet

Titles can be confusing. Anyone can call themselves a “behaviorist,” and a separation-training certificate isn't the same as a veterinary specialty.^{[13][14]} Ask about their experience with separation problems, how they find a starting point, the exact methods they use, what happens after a setback, fees, whether they review video, and what support you get between sessions. Choose someone who uses reward-based methods.^[1]

Medication is a conversation

For some dogs, medication makes life easier and helps training work, but only your vet can decide whether it's right for yours.^[5] Good questions to ask: what's it meant to do, what should I watch for, what are the side effects, how does it fit with training, and when do we check in? Never start, stop, share, or change a medication based on another dog's experience.

Skipping a treat during an absence is different from not eating in general. If your dog is eating less overall, or you notice other health changes, tell your vet.

TRY THIS

Fill in a message you can send today: “My dog struggles when _____. I see _____. It started _____. My biggest safety or practical worry is _____. I can share _____. I'd like help with _____.” Add any health changes when you send it to your vet.

YOUR FIRST 30 DAYS

Build a routine you can keep, without racing a deadline.



It's day twelve. You look at the calendar, then at your log. Your dog's comfortable absence is still short, and it would be easy to decide you're behind. But the calendar doesn't know your dog.

When I fostered Scout, an anxious young border collie, I kept a note on the fridge titled “What's easier now?” Some weeks the only entry was “Didn't get up when I put my shoes on.” The stopwatch barely moved at first, but that list showed the dog in front of me clearly had.

This plan organizes the work; it doesn't set a deadline.^[3] Repeat a week or bring in help whenever you need to.

Days 1–7: Understand and arrange support

1. Check for safety and health concerns, and see your vet if anything has changed.
2. Film your dog relaxing while you're home.
3. Gather what you know about departures, without staging stressful ones.
4. List the absences you can't avoid, and line up cover for them.
5. Choose your starting route from Chapter 1, and get help if the pattern is unclear.

Goal: a clear picture, a coverage plan, and your next step. Longer absences can wait.

Days 8–14: Start comfortable practice

If training at home suits your situation, start the small-absence plan. If you're working with a professional, follow their plan.

1. Choose one easy step and write it down exactly.
2. Plan a short session with your camera on and pauses built in.
3. Write down what you saw before deciding what it means.
4. Decide: repeat, make it easier, or move up a little.
5. Check that longer absences are still covered.^[4]

Goal: a practice routine you can actually keep, and useful notes.

Days 15–21: Fine-tune what needs it

Look for patterns. Does one cue change everything? Does a noise interrupt resting? Is your dog relaxed in one room but not another?

Pick one question and work on it, keeping practice comfortable. Use cue practice or a small change to the setup, and keep everything else the same so you can see what helped. Send a clip and your notes to a professional if you're stuck.

Goal: a plan that fits your dog better, even if the absences aren't longer yet.

Days 22–30: Review and plan ahead

Look beyond your longest success. Which steps are reliably easy now? Where does worry still show up? Is your dog more predictable? Is the coverage plan working for your household? What's still unclear, and do you need more help?

If practice is going well, try a different time of day or a slightly different routine, at an easy level. Don't combine a new situation with your longest absence on the same day.^[5]

ELIN'S TIP

Start your own “What's easier now?” note. Write down small, real changes. It gives you something to look at besides the stopwatch.

A sample week

One way a week might look. Adjust it to your household.

Day	Focus
Monday	Easy practice; write down what you saw
Tuesday	Sitter or friend covers a necessary appointment
Wednesday	Short practice; repeat or make easier based on Monday
Thursday	Review footage; send a question if you're stuck
Friday	One comfortable departure-cue practice, if needed
Saturday	Optional easy practice if the day allows
Sunday	Review your log; arrange next week's cover

What to do next

What you see	Next step
Relaxed, repeatable success	Make one small change or increase
Mixed or unclear results	Easier step; look at what was different
Distress	End the session and make it easier
Cover keeps falling through	Rework your care plan; ask for practical help
Danger or possible health changes	Pause and call your vet
Not sure what the behavior means	Share a clip with a qualified professional

When the month has been messy

The sitter canceled. Work changed. Life happened. Pick one thing to sort out: a gap in cover, a step to make easier, or an appointment to book. You don't need to restart the calendar.

TRY THIS

Write: "The step I'll practice is _____. The absence I need to cover is _____. The question I need answered is _____." Then put your next step on the calendar.

DEPARTURE LOG

Record comfort and context alongside duration.

Dog's name / week beginning / caregiver

Comfortable baseline behaviors

Signs that mean stop or simplify

Date / time	Setup + departure action	Planned / actual duration*	Observed behavior	Next adjustment

*Write seconds or minutes. For an action without an absence, write "no absence."

Relevant context: people, barriers, outside sounds, routine

What happened afterward?

Question for my veterinarian or behavior professional

WHAT DOES MY DOG DO?

Video observation checklist. Stop for distress or danger.

Date / time / people present / room

Before recording

- | | |
|--|--|
| ☐ Device and cables safe | ☐ Relevant area visible; sound on |
| ☐ Familiar setup | ☐ Baseline noted |
| ☐ Observation expected to be manageable | ☐ Able to return promptly |

Departure action / actual absence duration

What I observed

- | | |
|---|---|
| ☐ Comfortable resting | ☐ Looking toward exit |
| ☐ Following or approaching exit | ☐ Repeated movement / pacing |
| ☐ Whining, barking, howling | ☐ Trembling or salivation |
| ☐ Scratching / chewing / escape attempts | ☐ Eating or engaging with activity |
| ☐ Interrupting activity to monitor | ☐ Reaction to outside sound |
| ☐ Elimination | ☐ Out of camera view |

First change, timing, and what happened immediately before it

Observation shorthand

- | | |
|---|---|
| ☐ 0 · Comfortable | ☐ 1 · Uncertain |
| ☐ 2 · Distress suspected | ☐ 3 · Immediate safety concern |

A note-taking guide, not a diagnosis.

Action taken / question to follow up

For injury or health concerns, talk to your vet.

MY SMALL-STEP LADDER

Move up a row only when your dog is relaxed at the one before.

Dog's name / date

Departure situation we are working on

What comfortable behavior looks like

Current comfortable starting action

Proposed step	Smaller version if needed	Observed response	Repeat, simplify, or progress?

Signs that will make me stop

What I need to observe before making a step harder

My next practice / question for professional review

MY WEEKLY PLAN

Plan coverage as carefully as you plan practice.

Week beginning / this week's practical focus

Day	Necessary absence including travel	Coverage arrangement	Practice / review opportunity
Monday			
Tuesday			
Wednesday			
Thursday			
Friday			
Saturday			
Sunday			

Coverage gap still to solve / backup contact

Current manageable practice

End-of-week review

What appeared easier?

What stayed difficult or unclear?

One adjustment / professional follow-up for next week

CAREGIVER HANDOFF

Use with your dog's individual care and safety instructions.

Dog's name / owner and phone / backup contact

Location / coverage starts and ends

Veterinary practice and phone / emergency service

☐ Continuous company required

☐ Follow attached absence plan

☐ No departure-training experiments

☐ Emergency arrangements discussed

Entry, exit, and escape precautions

Comfortable resting arrangement / toilet routine

Approved food and activities / things to avoid

Early signs of concern

What to do if concern appears / when to contact me

Veterinary instructions; attach written medication directions if needed

Caregiver name / phone

Do not punish distress or introduce unfamiliar confinement. Contact the veterinarian about medical questions.

QUESTIONS FOR MY VET

Bring a short clip, timeline, and your main practical concern.

Dog's name / age / appointment date

Main concern / when it began

What happens, and in which circumstances

Changes I have noticed

- | | |
|---|--|
| ☐ Appetite / drinking | ☐ Toilet habits |
| ☐ Sleep | ☐ Movement / comfort |
| ☐ Orientation / responsiveness | ☐ Other behavior / none noticed |

Details / current medications and supplements

Questions to discuss

- ☐ Could a medical problem be contributing?
- ☐ What assessment or testing do you recommend?
- ☐ Does our setup create safety concerns?
- ☐ Would medication be appropriate to discuss?
- ☐ What should I monitor; what should prompt a call?
- ☐ Would a specialist or other referral help?
- ☐ How should the veterinary and training plans work together?
- ☐ When should we follow up?

My additional question

Agreed next steps / follow-up date

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Evidence note: the petting pilot involved dogs without separation-related problems. Music findings from other stressful settings do not establish treatment efficacy for home separation anxiety. Observation scores and sample schedules in this guide are practical, nonvalidated tools.

MORE FROM DOG PARENT LIFE



Some days, looking after a dog means finding a muddy towel. Other days, it means arranging a sitter, watching ten seconds of video, or asking someone qualified for help. All of it counts.

If you're ready for another useful read, here's what else is on the shelf:

- **100 Dog Facts**, our free ebook: why your dog does all the weird stuff they do.
- **The Quiet Dog Guide**: why your dog barks, and how to turn the volume down. Perfect if alone-time barking has the neighbors talking.
- **The Happy Coat Handbook**: grooming at home for every coat type.

I'll be over here checking whether Frost has opinions about the laundry. (He does.)

Elin & Frost

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This guide is for general education and doesn't replace advice from your veterinarian or a qualified behavior professional.