The Calm Goodbye

A Step-by-Step Plan to Help Your Dog Feel Safe Home Alone

WITH KINDNESS, NOT FORCE



PORCHLIGHT DOGS

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Contents

Read This First **3**
- Important safety notice 3
- Who this book is for 3
- What to expect, honestly 3
- The method in this book 4

How to Use This Book **5**
- The whole idea on one page 5
- Pick your route 5
- How much time this takes 5
- What the boxes mean 5

PART 1: UNDERSTAND

What's Really Going On **7**
- 1.1 Panic, not payback 7
- 1.2 Separation distress or something else? 7
- 1.3 Signs of stress to know 8
- 1.4 What doesn't usually work 8

Find Your Starting Point **9**
- 2.1 What you'll need 9
- 2.2 The filming test 9
- 2.3 Is it the door, or before the door? 9

Protect the Training **10**
- 3.1 Why long absences undo progress 10
- 3.2 Ways to cover your absences 10
- 3.3 If you truly can't avoid it 10

PART 2: TRAIN

Make Leaving Boring **11**
- 4.1 Departure cues 11
- 4.2 Door practice 11
- 4.3 Independence around the house 11

The Alone-Time Missions **12**
- 5.1 A mission, step by step 12
- 5.2 How fast to increase 12
- 5.3 What if your dog gets stressed? 12
- 5.4 Food toys: helpful or hiding the problem? 13
- 5.5 Plateaus 13

Support Your Dog's Whole Day **14**
- 6.1 Exercise and sniffing 14
- 6.2 Rest and routine 14
- 6.3 Your vet is part of the team 14
- 6.4 When to call a professional 14

Reading the Camera **15**
- 7.1 Relaxed, worried, or stressed? 15
- 7.2 Three sample sessions 15
- 7.3 Questions owners ask 16

PART 3: THE PLAN

Your 6-Week Plan **17**

Appendix **19**
- A. Mission log 19
- B. Note for your dog sitter 19
- C. Quick checklist before each mission 19
- Sources and further reading 20

BEFORE YOU START

Read This First

A few honest words before we begin.

Important safety notice

PLEASE READ

This book is general education for pet owners. It is not veterinary advice and does not replace a vet or a qualified behavior professional.

- **If your dog hurts themselves** when left alone (broken teeth, bleeding paws, escape through windows or doors), stop leaving them alone where possible and contact your vet and a behavior professional now.
- **If the problem started suddenly,** or your dog is older, see your vet first. Pain, urinary problems, and age-related changes can look like separation problems.
- **Never confine a panicking dog in a crate** to stop the damage. Some dogs injure themselves trying to escape.

Who this book is for

This book is for you if leaving the house feels like a guilt trip. Maybe neighbors have mentioned the howling. Maybe you come home to a scratched door, a chewed window frame, or a puddle from a dog who is otherwise house-trained. Maybe you've changed your whole life around never leaving your dog alone.

You didn't cause this by loving your dog too much. Many things play a part: genetics, early life, big changes like a move or a new schedule, and simply never having learned that being alone is safe. The good news is that dogs can learn it, one small step at a time.

What to expect, honestly

- This is a **gradual** process. Most dogs need weeks to months, not days.
- Progress is rarely a straight line. Good days and harder days are normal.
- Some dogs reach several hours alone. Some dogs do best with ongoing support like a dog walker or daycare. Both are fine outcomes.
- Results vary with every dog, their history, their health, and how consistently the plan is followed.

The method in this book

We use gradual, gentle practice: short absences your dog can handle, slowly built up. This approach, called systematic desensitization, is widely used by behavior professionals for separation-related problems. No punishment, no "letting them cry it out," no bark collars. A dog who is panicking can't learn that being alone is safe, and punishment adds more fear.

START HERE

How to Use This Book

The plan on one page, and where to start.

The whole idea on one page

1
Watch
Film your dog alone to see what really happens and when.

2
Protect
Avoid absences longer than your dog can handle while you train.

3
Practice
Short, calm absences, below the stress point, most days.

4
Build slowly
Add time in small, uneven steps.

5
Support
Exercise, sleep, enrichment, and your vet where needed.

Pick your route

If this sounds like you	Start with
"I'm not sure what my dog does when I'm gone."	Chapter 1 and the filming test in Section 2.2.
"I have to leave for work tomorrow."	Chapter 3, protecting your training.
"I'm ready to start training."	Chapters 4 and 5.
"I want a schedule."	Chapter 6, the 6-week plan.

How much time this takes

About **20 to 30 minutes, five or six days a week**, in one training session. Plus normal life: walks, play, rest. Rest days are part of the plan.

What the boxes mean

TRY THIS
A step you can do today.

WATCH OUT
A common mistake or a safety point.

GOOD TO KNOW

The reason behind a step.

EXAMPLE

How it looks in real life. Examples are composites, not real clients.

PART 1 · CHAPTER 1

What's Really Going On

Not all "trouble when alone" is the same problem.

In this chapter

- Separation distress vs. boredom
- The signs to look for
- Why your dog isn't being spiteful

1.1 Panic, not payback

It can feel personal when you come home to a shredded couch cushion. It isn't. A dog with separation distress isn't angry or getting back at you. They're scared, and frantic dogs do frantic things: dig at doors, chew exits, howl, pace, and sometimes lose bladder control.

That "guilty look" when you walk in? Researchers have found it's usually a response to your body language and tone in the moment, not proof that the dog knows they did wrong. Scolding after the fact only makes your return more stressful, and can make the next absence worse.

1.2 Separation distress or something else?

Likely cause	Typical signs	What helps
Separation distress	Starts soon after you leave (often within minutes). Damage at doors and windows. Howling, whining, drooling, pacing. Happens almost every time.	Gradual alone-time training (this book).
Boredom or energy	Chewing random things, often later in the absence. Dog seems relaxed, playful. Young, active dogs.	More exercise, enrichment, chew toys, dog-proofing.
Reacting to outside noise	Barking at sounds or passers-by, damage near windows, not at exits.	Block views, white noise, a quieter room.
Medical or house-training	Accidents when you're home too, drinking more, age-related changes.	Vet check, house-training refresh.

GOOD TO KNOW

The only way to know for sure is to watch. That's why filming your dog (Chapter 2) is the first real step in this book.

1.3 Signs of stress to know

Learn these, because you'll be watching for them on camera:

- ☐ **Early, mild:** lip licking, yawning, looking at the door, sniffing near the door, ears back, restless moving
- ☐ **Moderate:** whining, pacing, panting when not hot, shaking off as if wet, ignoring food
- ☐ **Strong:** barking or howling, scratching at the door, chewing exits, drooling, accidents

Your goal in training is to end each absence **before** even the mild signs appear, or as soon as they do.

1.4 What doesn't usually work

- **Getting a second dog.** Many dogs with separation distress are attached to people, not dogs. A second dog may help a few dogs, but it's a big decision and no guarantee.
- **Crate training as a cure.** Some dogs love their crate. Panicking dogs often get worse in one and can get hurt.
- **Bark collars.** They punish the symptom and add fear. Dogs can get quieter and more stressed at the same time.
- **"Cry it out."** Leaving a panicking dog to "get used to it" usually makes the fear stronger, not weaker.

PART 1 · CHAPTER 2

Find Your Starting Point

You can't plan the road until you know where you are.

2.1 What you'll need

- [ ] A camera you can watch live from your phone: a pet camera, a spare phone with a video call app, or a laptop
- [ ] A notebook or the log pages at the back of this book
- [ ] A timer

2.2 The filming test

1. Set up the camera so you can see the area where your dog spends time alone, and the door.
2. Do your normal leaving routine and leave. Watch live from your phone outside, in the car, or around the corner.
3. Note the time when you see the **first** sign of stress, even a small one.
4. Come back calmly as soon as you see moderate stress, or after 20 minutes at most for this test.
5. Write down the time. That's your dog's current **comfort time**.

> **EXAMPLE**
>
> Rosie, a 3-year-old Lab mix, started whining 40 seconds after her owner closed the door, and was scratching by 2 minutes. Her comfort time: about 30 seconds. That's not bad news. It's a starting line.

2.3 Is it the door, or before the door?

Many dogs start worrying long before you leave. Picking up keys, putting on shoes, grabbing a bag: these become signals that "the scary thing is coming." Watch your dog during your getting-ready routine. If they follow you, pant, or pace, these cues are part of the problem, and you'll work on them in Chapter 4.

PART 1 · CHAPTER 3

Protect the Training

The hardest part, and the most important.

3.1 Why long absences undo progress

Every time your dog is left alone past their comfort time, they practice panicking. That can erase days of careful work. While you train, try to **avoid absences longer than your dog can handle**. Yes, that's a lot to ask. Here are ways people make it work.

3.2 Ways to cover your absences

Option	Notes
Friends, family, neighbors	Often the cheapest. Many dogs are fine as long as *someone* is there.
Dog sitter at home	Good for longer days. Ask them to stay calm and low-key.
Doggy daycare	Only if your dog enjoys other dogs and the environment. Watch for stress.
Take your dog with you	Pet-friendly stores, the car on cool days only, a friend's house.
Work from home / adjust hours	Even a few weeks of flexibility can make a big difference.

> **WATCH OUT**
>
> Never leave a dog in a parked car on a warm day. Cars heat up fast, even with windows cracked.

3.3 If you truly can't avoid it

Sometimes you have to go. Make it as easy as you can: a long walk and a sniff session beforehand, a calm room away from the front door, white noise, and a chew or food toy if your dog will eat it alone. Then go back to training the next day. One unavoidable absence won't ruin everything.

PART 2 · CHAPTER 4

Make Leaving Boring

Take the scary meaning out of your "getting ready" routine.

4.1 Departure cues

List everything you do before leaving: keys, shoes, coat, bag, turning off lights, the alarm. Then practice those things at random times when you're *not* leaving.

1. Pick up your keys, carry them for a minute, put them down. Go back to what you were doing.
2. Put on your shoes and sit on the couch to watch TV.
3. Grab your bag, walk to the kitchen, put it down.
4. Do several of these a day, mixed up, for a week.

Over time, these cues stop meaning "I'm about to be alone."

4.2 Door practice

1. Walk to the door and touch the handle. Walk away.
2. Open the door, close it. Walk away.
3. Step outside for one second and come back in. Stay calm and casual.
4. Watch your dog. If they stay relaxed, move to two seconds, then five.

> **GOOD TO KNOW**
>
> Calm, low-key goodbyes and hellos are fine. You don't need to ignore your dog when you come home. Just keep the emotion level gentle, not a big dramatic scene.

4.3 Independence around the house

Some dogs follow their person everywhere, even to the bathroom. Gently build small moments apart while you're home: a comfy bed in the next room, a baby gate with you in view, a food puzzle while you cook. These are bonus exercises, not the main plan, but they help.

PART 2 · CHAPTER 5

The Alone-Time Missions

Short, calm absences, slowly built up. This is the core of the plan.

5.1 A mission, step by step

1. **Set up.** Camera on, dog relaxed, ideally after a walk and a potty break.
2. **Warm up.** A few departure cues and a door touch or two.
3. **Step out.** Leave for a time a little shorter than your dog's comfort time.
4. **Watch.** Watch live on your phone. You're looking for the earliest stress signs.
5. **Come back calmly** before stress builds, or at the first mild sign.
6. **Repeat** several short absences with a minute or two between, for a total of 20 to 30 minutes.
7. **Log it** on the mission log at the back of the book.

5.2 How fast to increase

Go slower than you think. A useful pattern is to **increase only after a relaxed session**, and to mix in shorter, easy absences along the way. For example, a session might look like: 30 seconds, 15 seconds, 45 seconds, 20 seconds, 50 seconds. The mix keeps your dog from learning that each absence is always longer than the last.

Your dog's comfort time	Typical step size
Under 1 minute	A few seconds at a time
1 to 10 minutes	10 to 30 seconds at a time
10 to 30 minutes	1 to 2 minutes at a time
Over 30 minutes	About 10% more at a time

5.3 What if your dog gets stressed?

It will happen sometimes. Come back calmly, take a break, and make the next few absences much shorter. Next session, start below where things went wrong. One stressful moment is information, not failure.

5.4 Food toys: helpful or hiding the problem?

A stuffed food toy can help some dogs settle. But many anxious dogs won't eat when alone, and a dog busy with a toy may only panic once it's empty. Use food toys if your dog eats them calmly, but watch the camera after the food runs out. If your dog ignores food when you leave, that tells you they're stressed, and your absences are still too long.

5.5 Plateaus

Many dogs get stuck at certain points, often around 20 to 40 minutes. If progress stalls for a week or more, try smaller steps, more rest days, a check of daily exercise and sleep, and a conversation with your vet. Sometimes medication can help a dog get past a plateau. That's your vet's call.

PART 2 · CHAPTER 6

Support Your Dog's Whole Day

A calmer life makes alone time easier.

6.1 Exercise and sniffing

Exercise won't cure separation distress, but a well-exercised dog finds it easier to relax. Sniff walks are especially useful: slow, exploratory walks where your dog leads with their nose.

6.2 Rest and routine

Adult dogs sleep a lot. A predictable daily rhythm with quiet rest periods helps anxious dogs feel safe. Avoid long, exciting play right before you plan a mission.

6.3 Your vet is part of the team

For many dogs with moderate to severe separation distress, behavior professionals recommend a vet check and a conversation about anti-anxiety medication. Medication doesn't replace training, but it can make training possible for a dog who is too panicked to learn. Never give your dog human medication or supplements without your vet's advice.

6.4 When to call a professional

- Your dog injures themselves or tries to break out.
- You've followed the plan carefully for several weeks with little progress.
- Your dog's comfort time is near zero and they panic as soon as you move toward the door.

Look for reward-based professionals: veterinary behaviorists (DACVB), certified behavior consultants, or trainers who specialize in separation problems, such as a Certified Separation Anxiety Trainer (CSAT).

PART 2 · CHAPTER 7

Reading the Camera

Your phone screen is your best training tool. Here's what to look for.

7.1 Relaxed, worried, or stressed?

Body part	Relaxed	Starting to worry	Stressed: come back now
Body	Lying down, loose, maybe stretched out on one side	Sitting up, alert, watching the door	Pacing, circling, can't settle
Ears	Neutral, soft	Swiveling toward sounds outside	Pinned back or held stiffly
Mouth	Closed and soft, or slow panting after exercise	Lip licking, yawning	Fast panting, drooling, whining
Activity	Chewing a toy, sniffing around calmly, napping	Stops chewing, walks to the door and back	Scratching, barking, howling, jumping at the door
Food	Eats calmly if food is available	Eats quickly, then watches the door	Ignores food completely

7.2 Three sample sessions

Level 1: comfort time under 1 minute

Absences in seconds: **3, 1, 5, 2, 8, 3, 10, 5, 12, 6, 15**. About a minute of calm normal life between each one. Total session: around 20 minutes, mostly spent inside with your dog, being boring.

Level 2: comfort time around 5 minutes

Absences: **1 min, 30 sec, 2 min, 1 min, 3 min, 45 sec, 4 min**. Add one departure cue, like keys, to every second absence.

Level 3: comfort time around 20 minutes

Absences: **5 min, 2 min, 15 min, 3 min, 22 min**. Start practicing your real routine: shoes, coat, car door, a short drive.

> **GOOD TO KNOW**
>
> Notice the pattern: the longest absence comes last, and easy ones are mixed in. Your dog never knows if this absence will be long or short, and most of them are easy.

7.3 Questions owners ask

"I work full-time. Can I still do this?"

Yes, but you'll need cover for workdays while you train (Chapter 3). Many owners use a mix: a dog walker at midday, a friend two days a week, daycare one day. Do your missions in the evening or on weekends.

"Should I ignore my dog when I come home?"

You don't need to. A calm, warm hello is fine. What matters most is that absences stay short enough for your dog to cope. Your greeting style is a small detail compared to that.

"What about leaving the TV or radio on?"

Some dogs find background noise comforting, especially if it masks outside sounds. It's worth a try, but it won't fix separation distress on its own. Check the camera to see if it helps your dog.

"My dog is fine with my partner but not with me."

That's common. Many dogs are attached to one person in particular. Train with each person separately, starting from each person's own comfort time.

"We live in an apartment and the neighbors complain."

Explain that you're on a training plan, and share how long it may take. A short, friendly note often helps. Meanwhile, use absence cover so your dog isn't left long enough to howl.

"Can I use calming supplements or pheromone diffusers?"

Some owners find them helpful, but evidence is mixed and they work best as a small addition to training, not a replacement. Ask your vet before giving your dog any supplement.

"How do I know we're making progress?"

Look at your log over weeks, not days. Is the longest relaxed absence slowly going up? Are stress signs appearing later, or milder? Those are wins, even on weeks that feel slow.

> **EXAMPLE**
>
> Duke, a 6-year-old rescue hound, started at 15 seconds. His owners used a dog walker and a neighbor for workdays and did missions every evening. Progress was very slow for three weeks, then sped up after a vet visit and a change in his daily routine. By week ten, Duke could stay calm for 35 minutes, enough for a grocery run.

PART 3 · CHAPTER 8

Your 6-Week Plan

A guide, not a race. Repeat any week your dog needs.

Week 1: Watch and Protect	Find your starting point
Do	Film your dog (Section 2.2). Set up absence cover (Chapter 3). Start departure-cue practice (Section 4.1).
Missions	None yet, or only door touches and one-second steps outside (Section 4.2).
Write down: comfort time _____	

Week 2: First Missions	Short and sweet
Do	Daily mission, 20 minutes, absences below comfort time (Section 5.1). One or two rest days.
Also	Departure cues at random times. Sniff walk daily.
Best relaxed absence this week: _____	

Week 3: Small Steps Up	Building time
Do	Increase only after relaxed sessions, using mixed lengths (Section 5.2).
Also	Add departure cues right before a mission: keys, shoes, then step out.
Best relaxed absence this week: _____	

Week 4: Real Routines	Make it feel normal
Do	Practice your real exit: car door, driving around the block (camera on).
Also	Check sleep and exercise (Chapter 6). Vet chat if progress is very slow.
Best relaxed absence this week: _____	

Week 5: Stretch Gently	Longer, still calm
Do	Keep mixing short and longer absences. Expect a plateau; it's normal.
Also	Try a different time of day for one mission.
Best relaxed absence this week: _____	

Week 6: Review	Plan the next stage
Do	Compare your log with week 1. Decide your next goal (for example, a grocery run).
Also	Keep going with missions 4-5 days a week until you reach your goal time.

Next goal: _____

TOOLS

Appendix

Print and keep by the door.

A. Mission log

Date	Absences (seconds/minutes)	First stress sign	Notes

B. Note for your dog sitter

"Thanks for helping! We're teaching [dog's name] that being alone is safe. Please don't leave [him/her] alone at all today. Keep hellos and goodbyes calm and quiet. If you need to step out, take [him/her] with you or call me. Thank you!"

C. Quick checklist before each mission

- [ ] Dog walked, pottied, and relaxed
- [ ] Camera on and working
- [ ] Planned absences written down
- [ ] Timer ready
- [ ] I'm calm and not in a rush

Sources and further reading

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