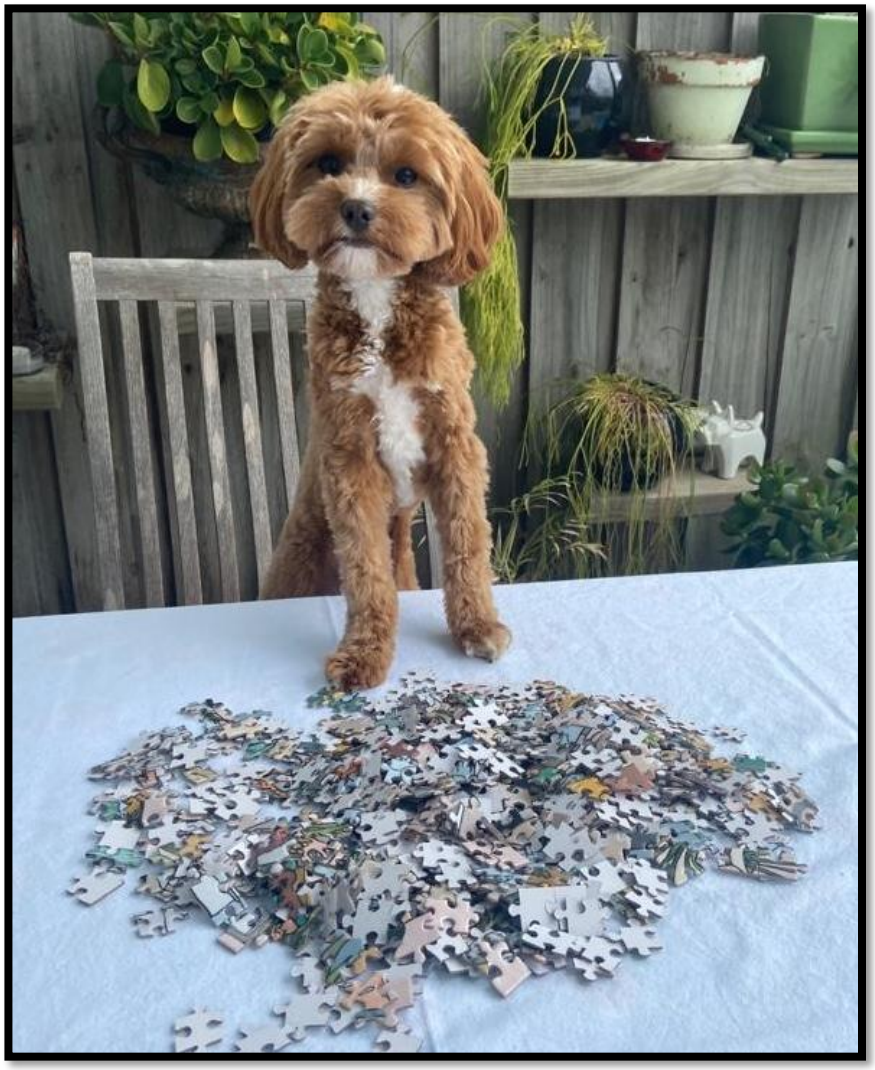
New Puppies and Separation Distress in the Time of COVID-19 – how to raise a Resilient, Stress Free and Independent dog!



Who will solve this puzzle with Roy, once his parents go back to work?

VetHQ has seen a surge in new “comfort puppies” coming through our doors since the COVID-19 restrictions.

We absolutely *love* seeing young, healthy puppies and talking to owners about their medical needs! Unfortunately, by the time we discuss vaccines and preventative treatments, there

isn't a lot of time to highlight the importance of training and behaviour modification in young dogs.

As a vet with a special interest in behaviour medicine, I have become increasingly concerned about the potential for *separation distress* in this new generation of pups. I reached out to our trainer, Libby Young, for some training tips to help prevent the development of separation distress during the COVID-19 restrictions.

What is separation distress?

Separation distress, also commonly known as separation anxiety, is *excessive and recurrent distress* associated with separation from a major attachment figure.

Why is my new puppy at risk of developing separation distress?

24/7 contact with you and your puppy during the COVID-19 restrictions means that puppies are not exposed to short or long periods of being alone. They are not able to develop sufficient independence during the critical socialization/learning phase of 8-12 weeks age. If puppies are not exposed to periods of alone time during this key period, it becomes very difficult for them to adjust down the track, and is why so many dogs suffer from severe emotional distress (fears, phobias and separation anxiety) as young adults.

When families eventually go back to work and normal activities, puppies who have had constant access to their humans are likely to feel bored, isolated and emotionally distressed.

What can I do to prevent my dog developing separation distress?

The *best thing* you can do for your new puppy is to encourage independence from *day one*!

1) Have puppy sleep on his/her own initially – There will be times in your life when your dog has to sleep away from you. Establishing an ability to do this early on will create a more resilient, independent dog. Use a small room (laundry, bathroom) or crate for this purpose. Keep in mind pups can only hold their bladders for 2-3 hours up to 12 weeks of age, so if you

use a crate, you will need to take them out to toilet frequently.

2) Restrict puppy's access to you on and off during the day – both in sight of humans (ie using a puppy pen or crate) and where puppy has no visual access to you at all (laundry or bathroom with closed door). Randomise this routine throughout the day and for varying amounts of time. Start short and work up! We don't want pup getting overly distressed.

3) Leave the house frequently – from day one make sure everyone goes out of the house at least once a day for between 1-3 hours without the puppy. Ensure puppy has access to a pee pad if out longer than 20 minutes.

4) Food toys give your pup something to concentrate on that does not depend on human company. Use food toys (eg Kongs) when leaving the house, but also use them when introducing puppy into a small space (pen, laundry, crate) to make it enjoyable and fun.

5) Mix up your routine! Feed puppy at random times, in different ways (food toys, scatter feeds, sometimes in a bowl) and in different locations. Walk puppy at different times of day and put them in different parts of the house – outside, in their pen or crate and in small rooms – at random.

6) Reward independence – give puppy love (pets, positive praise, a little treat) when he/she is relaxing somewhere away from you! Ignore "attention seeking" behaviours like jumping up or barking at you, and wait until they settle before giving them a reward.

7) Puppy Pheromones and Natural Anxiolytics – some puppies respond really well to pheromones like Adaptil® spray or collars, which mimic the pheromone of the mother dog to provide a natural calming effect. Zylkene® is a similar product in a powder form that acts like mother dog colostrum, providing a natural calming effect.

A note on older dogs…

Be aware that older dogs can develop over-dependence with owners being home so much at the moment as well so keep some of these strategies in mind with all our dogs during this time.

Should you need help, or if you have an older dog or puppy that is struggling, we strongly

recommend you engage a professional trainer or vet behaviourist.

Dr Liz Rowland

VetHQ Double Bay

This article is based on an article by Libby Young of The Sound Hound. Libby is a wonderful trainer who works with VetHQ and runs our puppy schools. She is also available for private consultations. You can find information on her offerings on her website http://www.thesoundhound.com.au/.

VetHQ also offers Behaviour Consultations for animals with mild to severe behavioural concerns. You can make a booking online with one of our vets at http://vethq.com.au/online-booking/ or by calling us (02) 9326 1255.