Creative Ideas for Managing Alone Time

How can I help a dog in my care who has separation anxiety?

By opening your home to a dog with separation anxiety you have already helped this dog immensely – thank you! Part of helping a dog with separation anxiety is to stop exposing them to the scary stimulus of alone time, which means that while in foster care, the dog should not be left alone. Managing the dog's alone time is essential to meeting their foster care needs. Once placed in a foster home, any dog suffering from separation anxiety should not be left home alone, even as the dog decompresses. We recognize that suspending absences to care for a dog is a big ask and may feel daunting, but please know that it does NOT need to be you, as the foster caregiver, that is always personally with the dog.

Why do I need to manage the dog's alone time?

Asking foster families to not leave the dog alone at home without a human present is truly not an arbitrary requirement that we have chosen for improving the dog's quality of life. Management is an essential part of the learning process because we cannot expose the dog to full-blown scary absences without severely compromising the potential for them learning alone time can feel safe. While dogs possess the ability to absorb and process information, we must remember that they are forming connections in the brain through repeated exposure and practice. If that exposure is too great, the connections made will not be positive ones, and this repeated stress will impact their ability to learn that absences are safe and doable.

Stress and anxiety are truly powerful, and studies have shown the toll they can take on the afflicted individual — both mentally and physically. To not make things worse for the dog and, rather, to help them feel comfortable and stress-free about alone time, we must not put them in a situation that will cause them to panic. Everytime we do, it will make it more difficult to learn alone time can feel safe.

How can I manage the dog's alone time?

Please remember, it does NOT need to be you, as the foster caregiver, that is always personally with the dog. Consider each individual dog's needs first. Some dogs flourish at doggie daycare, while others prefer to lounge on a person's lap in a quiet home environment. Suspending absences might feel overwhelming to foster families because of the anticipated financial investment for care. Here are a few lower cost ideas to consider:

- Reach out to the shelter/rescue to see what options are available.
- Ask friends, family, trustworthy neighbors, and other foster volunteers for support. While asking for help can be hard, we have discovered most people when asked are willing to lend a hand.
- Have the dog stay at the shelter office or go home with another staff member to cover shorter absences such as doctor appointments or any type of emergency trip.
- Look into delivery and/or pick-up of groceries and other goods.
- Post an ad in a common area if in an apartment, condo, or gated community setting.
- Offer to post and advertise for "at home" pet sitter volunteers on your organization's webpage, social media channels and during events.

For more ideas on how to get creative with suspending absences, please read these blogs: Crowdsourcing Alone-time Alternatives and Problem-Solving the Puzzle of Alone Time Management.