

# Teach Rex to stay home alone

A science-based and dog-friendly method for a home-alone pup  
By OhMyDog!

## INTRODUCTION

### WHAT ARE WE HOPING TO ACHIEVE?


Rex is content to stay home alone for up to 4 hours at a time.

*Caution: Dogs are hard-wired to enjoy our company. Be honest to yourself: you know staying home alone is never pleasant. At best, dogs spend alone time between sleep and mind-numbing boredom. So please, keep long periods of solitude to a minimum.*

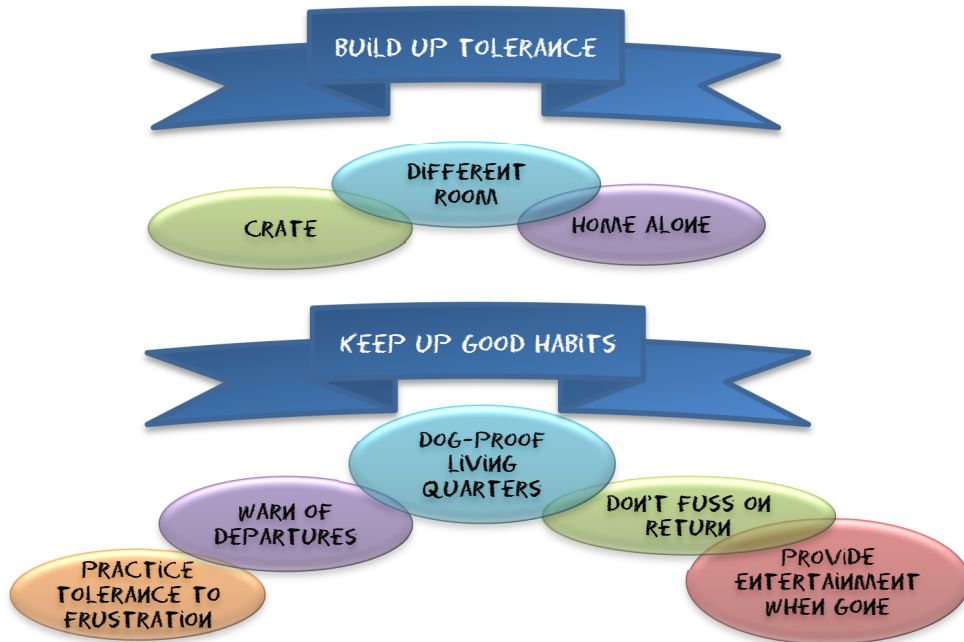
### WHY IS IT AN ESSENTIAL LIFE SKILL?

Teach your dog to tolerate alone time and you'll avoid damaged furniture, noise complaints, a chronically (and severely) distressed dog, and feeling guilty every time you step out the door.

### WHAT YOU'LL NEED

- Working from home/a dog sitter for the couple of weeks after your dog's arrival;
- A dog walker/dog sitter if you work away all day after the first couple of weeks;
- A pre-scented t-shirt (i.e. an old t-shirt that you've recently worn and not washed so it still smells of you);
- A dog-proof room or baby gates or a crate; and
- Two Kongs, or another slow food dispensing toy.

## THE METHOD



### BUILD UP TOLERANCE

Gradually introduce alone time by working your way up two ladders:

- **Duration:** From a few seconds to your target duration; and
- **Location:** Crate/behind baby gates, different room, out of the house.

#### **DURATION: ROME WASN'T BUILT IN A DAY**

Introduce Rex to staying alone (instructions under 'when you leave') for longer and longer periods.

Our time steps (diagram below) indicate a good rule of thumb. To start with, you'll be happy with just a couple of minutes (way more if the dog is happy with it, of course).

Only go up a step when the pup is comfortable at the present one, and go back one step if your pup is clearly uncomfortable at any point. Going too fast = making Rex separation-averse: the opposite of what we want.



***LOCATION, LOCATION, LOCATION:***

Now you understand the time step, let's apply them to 3 different situations, introducing them in this sequence:

1. **Behind baby gates (or in a crate):** the dog can see/smell/hear you, but cannot join you (more information on the crate in our [crate-training hand-out](#));
2. **Go to a different room:** the dog can smell/hear you, but cannot see or join you; and
3. **Leave the house:** the dog can neither smell, hear, see, nor join you.

For each setting, test the shortest duration, and then work your way up. Once the dog is happy with 15 minutes in the crate, try 2 minutes in a different room and work your way up to 15 minutes there. Once he's happy in a different room, that's where the real stuff begins: try leaving the house for 2 minutes, and then work your way up.

It'll go exponentially faster with each new setting, don't worry!

### ***BUT ISN'T IT GOING TO TAKE FOREVER!!***

You can cram in several 15-minute sessions in the first day alone. After a week, provided the dog is not separation-averse, you could already be working in huge increments.

And of course, depending on Rex' comfort levels, you could start the program with 15 minute durations. Whatever he's happy with is your starting point.

### **KEEP UP LIFE-LONG HABITS**

Now that we've trained Rex to be OK with separation, let's make sure he stays OK.

#### ***WHEN YOU LEAVE***

##### ***Departure times = Predictable***

Each time you leave, tell him. Pick words you **ONLY** say on that occasion.

*OMD! tip: Say 'bye-bye' in a foreign language.*

Because you always warn him, he won't worry each time you approach the front door, pick up your jacket or fiddle with your keys.

##### ***Departure times = Great times!***

Just after you've said 'bye-bye', sprinkle some treats, or give him that tightly stuffed Kong.

*OMD! tip: Google 'stuff a Kong' for inspiration.*


**ALWAYS** use the same routine: whether sprinkling treats or giving a Kong, do it **every-single-time-you-leave**. You're decreasing his stress and anxiety by making the departure routine predictable **AND** you're making him look forward to (at least the first 5 minutes of) alone time.

*Caution: Check the Kong for signs of damage and replace at the first sign of chipping.*

*OMD! tip: Have 2-3 Kongs handy: so there is always one pre-filled in the freezer, ready for use.*

### *WHEN YOU'RE GONE*

#### *Rex-proof his quarters*

- Enough room to turn around and walk a few paces;
- Fresh water;
- Comforting smells: one of your old t-shirts,  DAP diffuser; etc.
- Comfortable resting spots: the more spots, the better;
- Safe spot: no toxic substances, sharp objects, access to the street, etc.;
- Sturdy spot: Limited opportunity for Rex to damage your kid's toys, your shoes, your cushions, or anything that will seem irresistible to a bored/anxious dog in need of a stress-relieving chew.

*OMD! tip: If you don't want Rex to have the free run of the house, divide up a room with baby-proof fences.*

If you prefer to use a crate, see our [hand-out on crate-training](#).

*Caution: Crate confinement is not a treatment for separation anxiety. Please contact [info@ohmydogschool.com](mailto:info@ohmydogschool.com) if you suspect the dog is struggling with being home alone.*

#### *Shield him from street happenings*

So Rex doesn't get wound up all over again each time someone walks by, shield him from the street goings-on by closing the curtains.

*OMD! tip: For noise-sensitive apartment dogs: try playing a white noise recording.*

### *Provide some boredom relief*

Once Rex has licked his Kong clean, it could still be a while before you return. Avoid any illicit chewing/playing by providing entertainment. Here are some ideas:

- Wrap some treats in lots of discarded loo paper rolls which he has to 'destroy'/pry open to get to the treats. Google countless other cheap ideas.
- Hide treats in lots of places just before you leave, only giving him permission to find them as you leave.

If you are into cutting edge stuff:

- Check [@Nina Ottosson's](#) brain games.
- Leave [@DogTV](#) playing in a loop. Early research shows promising results.
- Check out [@Pet Tutor](#), a timer-set treat dispenser.

*Caution: Ensure whatever you use is safe for your dog, even unsupervised.*

Keep the entertainment varied: the longer he takes to solve your puzzles, the longer you'll keep boredom (one of the ingredients of separation problems) at bay. It also teaches him to be inventive when facing a challenge, thus proofing him some against frustration or panic.

### **WHEN YOU COME BACK**

When you come home, do not fuss. A calm, warm 'hello boy' and a little touch will do for now. Wait about 10 minutes, then smooch to your heart's content.

*OMD! tip: Break the habit of an intense reunion ritual by tidying away your coat, shopping, keys, etc. deliberately slowly. This will claim your attention for the critical first few minutes.*

### **WHEN YOU'RE HOME TOGETHER**

#### *Teach him to be alone even when you're home*

Even if you're home with him, aim at spending about 1/3 of your time independently. This decreases the contrast between your presence/absence.

### *Teach him to get over little frustrations*

If he wants attention at an inconvenient time, 'Not right now' is a perfectly acceptable answer.

This teaches him that your presence doesn't mean constant access to attention. Why is that good?

1. It builds up his tolerance to frustration (an ingredient in separation problems); and
2. It decreases the contrast between your presence and your absence.

### *Toughen him up against life's little stresses*

Dogs are more wary when alone, so Rex will startle and scare more in your absence. If he knows how to self-soothe, you're OK. If he doesn't, he could work himself up into a panic and end up destroying your door, wall, window (sadly, a typical scenario).

See our '[Make Rex brave](#)' hand-out to toughen up his shell against life's little stresses, and teach him to self-soothe.

## **FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS**

### ***I HAVE TO LEAVE HIM ALONE, BUT HE'S NOT TRAINED***

If you really can't find a dog-sitter, do NOT use the training Kong and the 'bye-bye' word. They mean safety and wellbeing, and we don't want to spoil that. Instead, leave him as much (safe) entertainment as you can (particularly chew toys), and make sure the space is dog-proof.

### ***I HARDLY EVER LEAVE HIM ALONE. SHOULD I TRAIN HIM ANYWAY?***

Dogs whose owners are always with them can have an even harder time adapting to a sudden separation, so it would be add even more value to train him preventively.

### ***I AM GOING BACK TO WORK AFTER A LONG STAY HOME: WHAT DO I DO?***

Follow the hand-out as if your dog had just arrived in your home. Try to leave yourself a couple of weeks of training before you start work again.

### **HE DESTROYED MY SHOES/COUCH. CAN I PUNISH HIM WHEN I RETURN?**

Punishing him after the facts will likely make matters worse: Rex will associate your punishment with your return, not his deed. This spells bad news: he could grow shy of you and his problems could grow worse. But above all: you're punishing him for something you did. You let him stay alone longer than he could handle.

Solution? You've guessed it: Train your dog to be OK home alone.

### **HE IS TOILET-TRAINED, BUT HAS ACCIDENTS WHEN HOME ALONE. WHY IS THAT?**

3 possibilities:

1. **Physical problem:** Start with a veterinary check-up.
2. **Incomplete toilet-training:** Check our [potty training hand-out](#).
3. **Separation panic:** Contact us for advice ([info@ohmydogschool.com](mailto:info@ohmydogschool.com)).

### **CAN I USE AN ELECTRIC COLLAR FOR THE INCESSANT BARKING?**

We advise against e-collars on three grounds:

1. **Welfare:** They inflict pain;
2. **False alerts:** They can go off from any loud sound (e.g. a beeping truck); and
3. **Hidden problem:** They do not address the issue behind the obsessive barking, which is likely intolerance to being left alone.



Try to work on his home alone skills before leaving him alone again, and see if it improves the barking.

## **PARTING WORDS**

By teaching your dog to cope with being home alone, you are giving yourself peace of mind for those inevitable absences. Invest in small, incremental steps at first, and you'll soon be making giant leaps on solid grounds.

If you feel stuck, contact us on [info@ohmydogschool.com](mailto:info@ohmydogschool.com).

## **RELATED DOCUMENTS**

-  Potty training hand-out
-  'Make Rex brave' hand-out



🐾 *Crate train Rex hand-out*