

Latchkey Canines-the modern malaise

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Around Australia everyday, tens of thousands of pet dogs are left alone from dawn to dusk, confined in yards attached to empty houses – 'latch key canines'. Long, routine periods of isolation can trigger problem behaviours for the dog, the family and the community such as barking, digging, chewing, escape tactics and even self-mutilation. This 'modern malaise' is probably the single biggest problem facing pet dogs and owners today. How can well-intentioned owners raise a contented dog in the time impoverished 21st century?

The Problem

- What we love most about dogs – their desire to belong, to be a part of our pack – is now working against them as our modern working lives take us out of our homes, away from our dogs. Being alone, without a job to do is completely unnatural for dogs. 'Workaholic' breeds such as the cattle dog, kelpie and border collie react most destructively to 'unemployment' however all dogs like to have a job to do be it hunting, retrieving or simply being a companion.
- Legal obligations to keep dogs on-property for their own safety and the safety of others, mean that dogs can no longer roam the neighbourhood freely socialising and exercising to their own natural requirements.
- Satisfying this need for exercise, exploration and socialisation therefore becomes the responsibility of already too-busy owners.
- In order to perform these responsibilities with any degree of enjoyment and success, your dog will need to learn to walk on a lead without pulling, play nicely with other dogs in the off leash park and come when called. Acquiring these skills takes the one thing owners are most reluctant or unable to give – *time*.

The typical time deprived dog.

- Is overly excited when you arrive home – jumping and nipping or rolling over and submissively urinating.
- Pulls your arms out when you try to walk him on a lead
- Doesn't come when called if let run in an off leash area.
- Is too wild to be allowed in the house.
- Doesn't obey any commands except maybe 'sit' sometimes.
- Scares children and visitors because of uninhibited excitement behaviours.
- Destroys the back garden by digging and chewing.
- Barks excessively at any minor disturbances.

The Solution – effective time management and planning

The good news is that with a bit of thought, planning and constructive time management you and your dog can live happily ever after even in the fast lane.

1. Exercise

The way to a happy dog's heart is not through his stomach but through his lead! Whoever walks the dog regularly will soon be the favoured member of the family. Admit it, a little bit more exercise probably won't do you any harm either and there is nothing like those big brown eyes looking longingly into yours to make you stick to that early morning walk. Dogs are most active at dawn and dusk which fits in well with most work schedules. A good brisk walk in the morning (minimum 30 minutes) and a short walk in the evening is the ideal exercise regime for most dogs leaving the middle of the day (while you are at work) for a good sleep.



2. Companionship

When you are at home bring your dog in. (see 'How to Bring your Outdoor Dog Inside' Dogs' Life September, 2000) . Allowing your dog to join you indoors will go a long way to meeting your dog's need for social interaction. Curling up together in front of the TV is one of the joys of pet ownership for both humans and dogs. Canines did not evolve as a solitary species they need feel a part of your pack.

3. Basic Training

Allocating time in the first year of your dog's life to basic training is well worth the investment and will be rewarded immeasurably throughout your dog's life. Training opens up the door to successful communication. Dogs already know how to sit, stand and down, what they need to learn is our words for these behaviours and why they should do it. Contrary to what some people think this does not come 'hard wired' in dogs – like children they must be taught human etiquette if they are to become a valued member of our family. A dog who is a pleasure to walk on the lead, socialises well with others and who comes when called is a pleasure to own and live with.

Training need not be laborious, there are lots of things you can train your dog to do sitting on the couch (see 'Armchair Training' Dogs Life August 2000 issue). It is more a mental commitment on your part to have consistent expectations of your dog whenever you are together. Obviously the more time you spend together the more chances your dog has to learn – another good reason for allowing your dog into the home. And because mental exercise is more tiring than physical exercise you'll produce not only a better behaved dog but a quieter one as well.

4. Leave a key!

Most dogs would rather be inside the den (house) rather than outside – especially if that is where good times are spent with you. A doggy door providing access to both inside and out is ideal. The dog feels he has some degree of control over his environment which is a great stress reliever. Leaving the radio or TV on if your dog is the type to fret or bark at the slightest noise is also a good idea. A radio will dull out some of the neighbourhood distractions and make home sound the same as when you are there.

5. Be Food Smart

There is no reason why your dog should get all of its daily food intake in one sitting. In fact most dogs are happier if fed several times a day rather than just once. More and more behaviourists such as world renowned veterinary Dr Ian Dunbar, are recommending taking your dog's daily calorie requirement, dividing it up and making your dog work for it in various ways. Put one third into a 'kong' or smoked marrow bone and make your dog struggle to get the tasty treats rather than simply vacuuming them out of a food bowl! Scatter kibble around your garden so your dog has to use his nose and hunt for food. Take another third and put it in a treat bag for training purposes. Using food in this way gives your dog a job to do and makes him 'work' for his pay packet just as he would in nature.

6. Home Alone Toys & Activities

'Home alone' toys such as treat balls and buster cubes which dispense food when your dog pushes them around with nose or paw, are a great way to keep dogs constructively busy and happy. A sand pit or designated digging area in the back garden laced with goodies to attract your dog is another great way to keep your dog amused - hopefully leaving the rest of the garden unscathed! A kong filled with food and hung upside down from a tree branch can also keep a dog amused for ages – especially for dogs that love to grab and tug. In summer small plastic wading pools can provide hours of entertainment and relief for home alone pooches. Let your imagination run wild and try to find independent activities that suit your dog.



7. Establish Routines

Dogs learn most quickly and seem to feel most secure with consistent routines. Dogs who know they spend certain times with you and certain times on their own will quickly adjust to that provided their physical and mental needs are being met on a regular basis.

A typical routine which would satisfy most dogs belonging to working owners might look something like this:

<u>Time</u>	<u>Dog Diary</u>
6 am	40 minute walk including run at off leash park. Met that gorgeous Golden Retriever again and we played.
7 am	Left with stuffed Kong full of treats, took ages to empty.
10am	Slept in the sun for a few hours.
2 pm	Explored the back garden and found another smoked marrowbone in my secret spot! Chewed to my hearts content.
4pm	Must have dozed off again. Think I'll go in the doggy door and snooze near the front door – getting close to coming home time.
6 pm	"She' home! She's home! She's home!"
7 pm	Watch mum and dad eat dinner. I got some left over good bits!
8 pm	On lead walk around the block for 20 minutes. Gee smells are great at night.
9pm	Played tug of war with dad on the floor. He's pretty strong – he won twice, I won once.
10pm	Allowed to cuddle with mum on couch in front of TV – does life get any better than this?
10:30pm	Biscuit & Bed – goodnite!

If you work irregular hours it will be much harder for your dog to adapt. In this case try to provide some consistency by hiring a professional dog walker or part time carer (see below 'Share the Care'). Making sure the dog has frequent opportunities to eat is also essential as you don't want to add hunger to the stress of wondering when you'll be home.

8. Share-the-Care

You are not the only time-short dog owner in your community. Why not see if someone else has a dog who would rather not be alone all day and take turns letting them spend the day together. If your dog is the type to prefer people perhaps there is an elderly couple who would love to spend some time with a dog but are not prepared to take on the full time responsibility of another pet of their own. Make up a flyer with a picture of your dog, what sort of assistance you are looking for and drop it in letterboxes around your block.

9. Doggy Day Care

Not yet common in Australia, Doggy Day Care is a growing industry in the US precisely to meet the needs of the 'latch key canines'. Doggy Day Cares are only suitable for highly social dogs and even then most managers suggest only enrolling the dog for two to three days a week as they may get 'overstimulated' – sound like kindergarten kids? If you feel there is a need for doggy day care in your area why not start one yourself?

10. Dog Walkers

If you are really pressed for time you might consider the services of a growing number of professional dog walkers. Knowing your dog has already had a good run when you come home is a great way to relax and enjoy your dog without feeling 'guilty' or pressured to



go out again yourself. If you can't afford a professional walker try asking around the neighbourhood again, there may be someone who walks for fitness that would be happy to take a well-behaved four-legged companion with them.

11. Take your dog to work?

Some of the happiest and best trained dogs in the world belong to tradesman who can take their dogs on the job with them. Just being together so many hours per day usually results in a good working relationship. Some nurses, shop keepers and office workers have also managed to bring their well behaved pooches into work with them. It may be just a pipe dream for most of us but there's no harm in trying.

12. Performance Sports

Need a hobby? Ever thought about spending your weekends competing in performance sports with your dog? Agility is the fastest growing dog sport in the world and it is easy to see why. It's a great way for suburban dogs and owners to burn off excess energy while negotiating jumps, tunnels and other obstacles. Agility enhances training skills while having loads of fun and exercise. Other activities you might consider are flyball, retrieving trials, earth dog work (for terriers), sheep work and obedience. Contact the Canine Council in your State for details.

13. Another Dog?

People often think getting another dog is the answer to the 'latch key canine' problem - which may explain why multiple dog ownership is on the rise. As often as not however buying another dog simply doubles your trouble (see 'Get Your Dog A Dog' Dogs'Life May 2000). There are several points you should consider:

- Are you getting another dog because you want one too or just because you think it will be good for your dog. If *you* don't really want a second dog – don't!
- Does your dog generally like other dogs or is it more a 'people' dog. Some dogs have no desire to mix with dogs.
- Is your dog reasonably well trained including housetraining? Second dogs learn bad habits as well as good from the resident dog. Make certain you have a good relationship and control over your first dog before you think about getting another.
- Even if you have two dogs it is a good idea to spend a bit of one on one time with each to make certain they both bond to you more than to one another.
- When you leave you'll have four big brown eyes staring at you instead of two.
- Are you prepared for the extra work of training and exercising, grooming and feeding two dogs rather than one?
- If you are still convinced getting a second dog is the answer it is a good idea to get one of the opposite sex and unless there is a specific reason why you would like to breed, desex both.
- Don't necessarily think in matched sets – sometimes a smaller dog will make a great companion for a larger dog and may be less work and expense.
- Buying a second dog is not an easy fix solution to the 'latch key canine' syndrome however in many cases a second dog will enrich the lives of both the canine and human members of the family.

Wise time

Dogs can adapt to a wide range of living conditions provided they know that when you are together, they are valued and loved. Devote a portion of your day to train and play with your dog and your time will be amply rewarded. I call it 'wise time' – a time when my dogs and I learn from one another. The dogs learn how to read me like a book, to sense how I feel and what I might do at any given moment. I learn once again to appreciate the simple joys of life – the smell of the grass, the sun on my back and the quiet pleasure of my best friends company. Take the journey – it is well worth the effort.

