

Be Right Back! Podcast with Julie Naismith

Episode 044 Transcript – Is Separation Anxiety Training Actually Unethical. NO. Here's why.

<https://julienaismith.com/episode-44/>

So today we're talking about whether Separation Anxiety training is actually ethical. And that probably seems a really odd question for somebody like me to ask, because I spend my entire working time helping owners and trainers get dogs over separation anxiety. So why on earth am I asking a question about whether it's ethical or not? Because surely, I wouldn't be doing something if I thought it wasn't. Anyway, I'm going to dive into that today.

Okay, so why did this topic come to me when I spend all my time trying to get owners and trainers get dogs over separation anxiety? Well, I was hearing stuff about the fact people were saying separation anxiety training isn't ethical, it isn't good, we shouldn't be doing it. We shouldn't be teaching dogs to be alone when most dogs are social creatures who want to be with us. And spoiler alert, I think we should be doing separation anxiety training. Yeah, of course I do. And I'm going to tell you why. Despite the number of blog posts that seem to be saying that we shouldn't do it, I'm going to tell you why it is ethical and how we do it in a way that is totally safe with the dogs.

I'm going to explain why teaching a dog to be home alone is a good thing. It's not something we should be worrying about, it's something we should be pleased with. We should be pleased with the outcome. If we can get a dog to be okay on its own, that's a good thing. So don't be put off if you're a separation anxiety trainer already or if you're thinking of becoming one. Don't suddenly, if you see one of these blogs that's going around at the moment, don't suddenly get petrified that you might be in some way damaging a dog. I'm going to tell you why. It's quite the opposite, in fact.

So the notion that's out there, and maybe it's out there because of the pandemic, is, as I said, we've got a social creature, and what we're doing is getting that social creature dog to be alone. And that that isn't natural. So they're social creatures. Being alone doesn't come naturally to them. Therefore, training them to accept being alone is getting them to do something they wouldn't otherwise choose to do, and therefore it's unethical. So that's the line of thought. That's the argument. And there are some bits that I agree with. Should dogs spend an awful lot of time on their own? No, I don't think they should. But we need to have a slight reality check here.

For a start, we do know that the vast majority of dogs don't love being alone. I'd say all dogs, any dog that's left isn't jumping up and down saying, this is the absolute best thing ever. It's not like it's Friday night and your other half goes out, or your housemate says that they're going out tonight because they can now, and you've been locked up with them for five months. And so you're over the moon that you get to have some time to yourself. You're on your own. It's

amazing. You get to watch what you want, eat what you want, you can have an early night, you can have late night, you can take a long bath.

Whatever you decide to do, it feels blissful, doesn't it? Because you've been locked up with these people for months, so you're almost jumping up and down when they say they're going to go out. That isn't our dogs. They are not overjoyed when we go out. No dog ever. Probably not even dogs who are being abused, sadly, because we know how much they love us, even when people do bad things to them. And the study from John Bradshaw, the study he did, suggested at least 80% of dogs struggle. They do struggle when we go out. And it's probably even more than that. So, yeah, I get it.

Dogs don't love being left, but they are being left and that's the world that we inhabit. That's where we are. It is utopian to expect that dogs will never be left. So we've got utopia and then we've got reality. I'm not saying that when people get dogs, we shouldn't be counseling them. You know what, if you're going to be out 10 hours a day, if you're going to be out 10 hours a day, five days a week, maybe this isn't the best time for you to get a dog. Or if you do think through the cost of getting a sitter or sending your dog to daycare. I'm not saying we shouldn't be giving that advice. I don't think any dog should be left for long periods of time for days on end. No dog, not even the ones who cope perfectly with it. So we should be advising owners. But however, again, back to reality. We have to work with what we've got. So here are my three reasons why I think this is a flawed argument and why we do need to still keep training.

Okay, so there's three big reasons why I think this is a flawed argument. First of all, we have to work with what we've got. We aren't living in a utopian society where everybody can stay at home with dogs. We are working with plenty of owners who have to go out and who have dogs who cannot be left. That's reality. That's where we are. And those owners and those dogs need our help because what's going to happen. They're going to be left and they're going to be scared.

So reason number one, reason number two is being with a dog, 24/7 doesn't happen. I often hear in my owner networks, I'll often hear people who say, work full time or got very busy social life, say, oh, it's all right for them, it's all right for them. They can stay at home. And usually it's retirees or people who work from home, it's all right for them. They can have a dog with separation anxiety because they can be with a dog 24/7 but they're not. There's this idea, this notion that there are these unicorn people out there, unicorn owners, who can be with dogs. 24/7 no, they can't. They need to go to hospital appointments. They need to go to dentists.

And when I last checked, unless you have a service dog, those dogs cannot come with you to the dentist and most supermarkets and most grocery stores. So there aren't these unicorn owners who can have a dog who isn't left 24/7 they don't exist. They exist in our utopia, but not in reality they have to go out also. Even if they could find a way not to leave those dogs, maybe they could. Maybe they get the pet sitter in when they go to the grocery store. There'll be an occasion, there'll be an emergency, there'll be a time when they cannot make arrangements.

And then we've got dogs who cannot cope with being left and are thrown into a shocking situation because they have never been given the coping skills.

The third reason is if we assume that we are okay with the concept of dogs living with us being domesticated. And that's a whole other debate to have, then we need to decide if we're comfortable with them doing things that go against their nature, because we do that to dogs all the time. And I'm not talking about force here. I'm not talking about fear or pain or coercion or using aversives. I'm talking about even when we use gentle methods, we can get dogs and we do get dogs to do things that they do not naturally want to do.

Great examples of that, having their paws handled, that's just plain weird. If you're a dog, having your paws handled could mean that your paw, your foot, your leg is going to be injured, and that is a death sentence to a wild dog. We get them to go to the vets and have their bodies handle same thing. A massive threat, having their body prodded and poked and having your hands all over them. And what about petting? What about patting on the head? Have you noticed, I'm sure you have. How many dogs don't love it, they don't naturally like it. We have to encourage them. It's not normal. So if we are okay with dogs being in our world, we are going to have to accept that even with gentle training methods, we will be getting dogs to do things that they don't naturally want to do. So let's not single out separation anxiety, home alone training, because there are many things in a dog's life that the dog doesn't want to do that we get it to do. And so unless we abolish dog ownership. Are we going to do that?

Well, again, debate for another day, but unless we abolish dog ownership, we'll always, always be getting them to do things that they don't want to do. I'm not saying we make them uncomfortable doing that, but they don't naturally want to do it. And what matters when we get them to do those things is how we do it, how we do that training so that we don't use fear and we don't use pain, but we gradually and gently get dogs to be okay with things that they wouldn't naturally be okay with. And that's what separation anxiety training is. That's what good separation anxiety training is. It is slow, it is gentle, it is not coercive, it is not using any type of force. It's actually the ultimate, in my view, the ultimate in choice training because we're absolutely not using any aversive and we're not using food.

So we're not risking some of those really drifty dogs who get in conflict and they don't want to get close to the dog across the road, but they really like the sausage, but they don't want to get close to the dog, but they'll take the sausage. And sometimes we get an inaccurate read on that dog because really it's just getting over its fear of the dog on the other side of the road only temporarily while it takes the sausage. But with separation anxiety training, we don't use food, so we're not even using that type of coercion. And when we do separation anxiety training well, and if we're not doing it well, don't do it. We mustn't do it. When we do it well, it equips the dog. It equips a dog with the most important and excellent coping skill, that of being home alone. Because we leave dogs, we do leave dogs. It's a reality. So we're equipping them to cope with something that, yes, they wouldn't vote for. It's not top of their list, but it's going to happen to them when we do separation anxiety training, right? When we do it well, we show a dog that being home alone, as much as they're not voting for it, it's not scary, it's not threatening, it's not

life endangering, and that's what matters. Will a dog ever love being left alone? I doubt it. I doubt it. But the most important thing is we can teach them that it's okay, we can give them those coping skills, we can stop it from panicking.

And that's our goal. So until that day when dog ownership is banned, we need to keep doing this. We need to keep doing what we're doing to give those dogs the skills they need to live in this crazy world that isn't of their choosing. We need to teach them home alone is safe. And if we do that, and if we encourage owners to minimize alone time, not just for anxious dogs, but for all dogs, we are putting the welfare of our domesticated dogs first. Oh, could you tell our passionate about that? I'd love to know what you think.

Do you think I'm crazy? Do you think I'm crazy for even raising the topic? Isn't it obvious that what we're doing is a good thing? Or do you have reservations? Do you sometimes think, oh, I'm not sure. Is this the right thing to do? Are we forcing dogs to do something that they don't want to do? I'll be back next week with another topic, maybe not as controversial. I hope to see you then. Thanks for joining me today and look forward to seeing you on the next one.