

RETURNING TO WORK/SCHOOL AFTER COVID-19

It has been jokingly said, "This is the time all dogs have waited a lifetime for; having their families with them 24/7". Cats, not so much. The cats are thinking, "I thought you told me when I went home with you that you wouldn't be around so much".

Because of the Covid-19 pandemic all of our lives have changed drastically. Home schooling, working from home, the stress of not having a job, being together with our families 24/7 or being alone has affected all of us. Our pets have been affected and will continue to be affected by the next transition when people return to work and with no one being at home with the dog for long periods of time.

Dogs are pack animals and love being with their humans. As you begin to think about going back to work you must think of ways to get your dog use to being alone again. Dogs can develop separation anxiety. This is a stress reaction to being without their humans. In preparation for this transition, some things can be done. Find a safe space for your pet, such as a spare room where a door can be closed or baby gate can be put across the door way. Make this safe space a happy place for your dog. It could be a place with toys or treats or nice soothing music and a great bed.

The idea is that you put your dog in this space and go away for a bit. A small amount of time like two minutes to begin with. The dog can still hear you but you are not there with the dog. Keep increasing the time and check each time to see how the dog is doing. Do not make a big deal out of leaving. You want to bring calmness to the dog, not excitement by ramping up the energy with a high squeaky voice and lots of goodbyes. Eventually you will leave the house for a period of time. To begin with it might be the time it takes to walk around the block or drive the car around a block or two. As you proceed, you will notice what's happening and you can move backwards or proceed forward with your plan depending on the level of anxiety being created by your leaving.

Always make the dog's space a happy attracting place with safe toys and treats. Hopefully, by the time you return to work your dog can be left with minimal stress and maximum freedom. Putting the dog in a spare room with a closed door is intended to be used as a training tool getting the dog use to being alone. I am not suggesting that you lock your dog in a room all day long while you are gone. For instance, my dogs have always had free rein of the house and the backyard, through the doggie door when I am gone. My particular dogs did not destroy things, did not fight with each other and could handle that level of freedom.

It's up to you to determine how much free rein you give your dog. Just remember that wherever you leave the dog in your absence, create the best environment possible where your dog will experience the least amount of stress when you are not there.

Your comings and goings should happen without a lot of fanfare. An exercised dog is less likely to be stressed and cause trouble. Before you go to work take your dog for a walk or run. If you cannot do that, play ball with your dog or do some other activity that allows your dog to release some energy. Consider your dog's age, size and temperament when deciding the right amount of exercise. A 15-year-old dog will obviously be less inclined toward vigorous exercise than a 10-month-old puppy.

Depending on how your preparation goes you can slowly return to whatever routine the dog had before "shelter in place". If you have a dog that is feeling very anxious about this change you might consider a camera in the home that you can view from work to see what's going on. Some dogs go to doggie daycare. You can find a neighbor or pet care giver to come over during the day to give your dog a walk. If there is another companion animal in the house this will help. However, getting a second dog at this time, may not help, as the dog will be missing you and may not accept another dog as a substitute.

Kong's are excellent for entertaining your dog. You can start by filling them loosely with something tasty and as the dog gets use to it pack it tighter so it takes more time to unpack resulting in more activity for the dog. You can hide several of these around the house of the yard and keep your dog entertained all day. If you use several Kongs a day you can fill them with your dogs regular food. You do not want to give a dog lots of treats in addition to his/her daily food as you will end up with a very fat and unhealthy dog. Before you leave your dog home alone with Kongs give him/her one while you can watch. Most dogs will not destroy them and get them caught in their digestive tract, but you do want to know that before you risk using a kong.

This article is mostly for dogs, but a few words about your kitty. Most cats are independent, but some are more dog like. Be sure your kitty gets love, good food and water and playtime with you when you are with them. Cats like toys too, so leave some for them to play with when you are absent.

Best of luck to everyone as you go back to work, kids return to schools and hopefully your pet transitions relatively easily into this new state of affairs.

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