

NORTHWEST LAGOTTO

The Sixteen-Week Absence Protocol

From seconds to a working day — one rung at a time.

An evidence-based companion for the first four months your puppy is home — built on Salonen, the Royal Veterinary College Pandemic Puppies cohort, and the DeMartini protocol.

PREPARED BY
Northwest Lagotto
Lynden, Washington

EDITION
Spring 2026
nwlagotto.com

FOREWORD

Why this protocol exists

A note on what we are doing here, and why.

This protocol exists because separation-related behaviour is the single most common reason a young Lagotto loses its home, and it is also among the most preventable. The work that prevents it is not difficult. It is, however, structured, sequential, and unforgiving of shortcuts — which is why a step-by-step companion belongs on the fridge for the first four months your puppy is home.

A NOTE ON WHAT THIS PROTOCOL IS

This is the Northwest Lagotto absence-training staircase, expanded into the form a working family can actually use day to day. It is the practical companion to our journal essay on separation and Lagotto temperament; that essay makes the case for why early absence training matters and what the science says. This document is what you do about it.

Every Northwest Lagotto puppy has already begun absence work before she leaves us. Crate familiarisation, brief separations from littermates, Puppy Culture's absence-tolerance protocol — all of it is logged in the file you receive at pickup. This protocol picks up exactly where ours leaves off, on the day she comes home at eight weeks, and runs through week sixteen of the placement — puppy age twenty-four weeks, which corresponds to the close of the second fear period.

It is intentionally conservative. A puppy who completes the staircase as written will likely be ready for longer absences sooner than the timeline suggests. That is the point. Slow is faster than fast, because every panic episode reinforces the wrong association, and every reinforced episode is weeks of work to undo.

A WORD ON PHILOSOPHY

This protocol operates within the LIMA framework — Least Intrusive, Minimally Aversive — endorsed by the American Veterinary Society of Animal Behavior. It is grounded in the work of Malena DeMartini, CTC, CSAT, whose *Be Right Back* (2020) is the cornerstone reference on canine separation anxiety; in Patricia McConnell, PhD, CAAB, whose booklet *I'll Be Home Soon* remains the most accessible introduction to the topic; and in the epidemiological literature on prevalence — most importantly Salonen et al. (University of Helsinki, 2020), the largest behavioural survey ever conducted in dogs, with n=13,715 across 264 breeds.

We do not endorse approaches that rely on flooding (forcing the dog through absences past her threshold), aversive bark deterrents (citronella, ultrasonic, shock), confinement until exhaustion, or the still-circulating folk advice to “let her cry it out.” The science on these methods is settled: they

produce learned helplessness rather than tolerance, and they are associated with worse long-term outcomes than doing nothing at all. The closing page of this protocol lists what we deliberately omit and why.

THREE RULES THAT GOVERN THE ENTIRE PROTOCOL

- 1. Never extend an absence past what your puppy can tolerate without distress.** The home camera tells you the truth — review it honestly. A puppy who paced for forty minutes of a one-hour absence did not “do great because the house was fine when you got home.” She did badly, and the next absence should be shorter, not longer.
- 2. When she fails, back up to the previous stage and rebuild.** Failure is diagnostic, not catastrophic. A back-up of one stage usually resolves the issue in three to seven days. The mistake to avoid is pushing through, hoping the next session goes better. It will not.
- 3. Walk every rung in order. Do not skip.** Consolidate each stage for at least the recommended duration before extending. The protocol is structured the way it is because the underlying behaviour change — building a positive or at minimum neutral association with departure — happens gradually, not in jumps.

DIAGNOSTIC

The three patterns

Boredom, frustration, and true distress are not the same thing.

Before you begin the protocol, you need to know what you are treating. The three patterns below are routinely confused — by owners, by general-practice veterinarians, and by trainers without specific behavioural credentials. Confusing them is the most common diagnostic error, and the wrong intervention for the wrong pattern can entrench rather than resolve the problem.

	Boredom	Frustration	True Distress
Trigger	Understimulation. Present whether or not you are home.	Confinement. Resolves once escape becomes clearly impossible.	Departure cues and isolation. Begins before you leave.
Onset	Gradual, throughout the day.	Within minutes of confinement, then settles.	Often within seconds of the door closing — sometimes earlier.
Vocalisation	Brief, intermittent. Stops when something engages her.	A burst of barking or whining, then quiet. Rarely sustained.	Sustained, escalating, does not resolve within twenty to thirty minutes.
Physical signs	Chewing accessible items. Sleeps when bored of chewing.	Scratching at gate or door once or twice. Then sleep.	Pacing, panting, drooling, dilated pupils, refusal to eat or drink.
Destruction	Whatever is convenient — slipper, remote, paper.	Often none.	Concentrated at exit points: door frames, window sills, crate bars.
Elimination	Rare in a house-trained dog.	Rare.	Common despite being recently toileted and fully house-trained.
Resolves with...	Enrichment. A food puzzle, a chew, a long walk before you leave.	Patience and a few repetitions. The dog learns confinement is survivable.	Systematic desensitisation. Enrichment alone does not touch it.

The single best diagnostic tool is a home camera. Set it up before the first absence and review the footage rather than the front-door damage report. A bored dog chews and sleeps. A frustrated dog scratches and settles. A dog in true distress paces and pants and does not sleep. The footage tells you which protocol you are running.

WEEKS 1 – 2

Puppy age 8–10 weeks

Visual Separation

*Seconds to two minutes***THE STAGE**

The first ten days home are about establishing that absence is normal, brief, and uneventful. A baby gate goes up between you and your puppy. You sit in the next room — visible to her, ignoring her, not making eye contact. Start at ten seconds. Work up to two minutes over the week. The crate stays in the bedroom at night with the door open during the day; she should not be confined unless you are actively training, eating, or unable to supervise.

The visual element matters. She can see you, she can hear you, she simply cannot reach you. This is the gentlest possible introduction to the concept that you are sometimes occupied and she is sometimes not the centre of attention. Three to five short sessions per day is the right cadence. Always return before she becomes distressed — if she is whining at thirty seconds, the next session is twenty.

WHY THIS WORKS

At eight to ten weeks, your puppy is in the secondary socialisation period and the hippocampus is forming the spatial and temporal associations she will carry for life. Whatever absence feels like during these two weeks becomes baseline normal. A gate-mediated visual separation is below the threshold that triggers the puppy's stress response, which is precisely why it works — you are building the association in the absence of cortisol, not in spite of it.

WHAT TO WATCH FOR

- Whining that escalates rather than fades within twenty seconds. If this happens, you have started too long; halve the duration and rebuild from there.
- Frantic gate-pawing. Different from a single curious paw — it is rhythmic, sustained, and accompanied by vocalisation. Same response: shorten and rebuild.
- Complete shutdown — the puppy who goes still and silent and does not engage when you return. This is also distress. Look for the wagging, soliciting puppy on your return, not the frozen one.

Gate, not door · Sub-threshold only · Bedroom crate at night

WEEKS 3 – 4

Puppy age 10–12 weeks

Out of Sight

*Five to ten minutes***THE STAGE**

Now the barrier becomes a closed door. The puppy is in her pen or crate with a high-value chew — a frozen Kong, a bully stick, a long-lasting puzzle — and you leave the room. Five minutes the first day, ten by the end of the week. The chew is essential: it gives her something positive to do during the absence and creates a conditioned emotional response — Kong appears, you disappear, life is still good.

Set up a camera before the first session. From this stage onward, the camera is non-negotiable. You cannot honestly evaluate what is happening on the other side of the door without it, and your impression on returning home — based on the state of the room and the puppy's greeting — is systematically misleading.

WHY THIS WORKS

The transition from visual separation to out-of-sight separation is the largest single jump in the staircase, which is why the chew matters. By pairing your absence with food — and specifically with food the puppy only ever gets when you are leaving — you are running classical counter-conditioning in parallel with the absence training. The departure cue (you walking out of the room) begins to predict something good, not just the loss of you.

WHAT TO WATCH FOR

- She finishes the Kong and then begins to vocalise. The chew was too brief or the absence was too long. Lengthen the chew, shorten the absence.
- She refuses the chew and watches the door. This means she is over threshold before you have left. Drop back to the Weeks 1–2 stage and rebuild visual tolerance before re-attempting closed-door separation.
- She vocalises briefly on departure, then settles. This is normal, particularly in the first few sessions. Wait until she is quiet for at least sixty seconds before returning — never reward vocalisation by appearing during it.

Add chew at departure · Camera on · No greetings until calm

WEEKS 5 – 6

Puppy age 12–14 weeks

Leave the House

*Twenty to thirty minutes***THE STAGE**

The first actual departures. Walk to the mailbox. Sit on the porch with a coffee. Take a short loop around the block. Twenty minutes the first time, building to thirty by the end of the second week. Continue with the chew, continue with the camera, continue to keep arrivals and departures low-key — no extended goodbyes, no reunion theatre when you return.

If you have a partner, a child, or a family member who can leave separately, this is the stage to begin varying the departure routine. The puppy who has only ever been left by one person develops a tighter bond to that person and a sharper response when that specific person leaves. Multiple departing handlers from the start produces a more resilient adult dog.

WHY THIS WORKS

By twelve to fourteen weeks the puppy's bladder capacity has caught up to a thirty-minute window, which means absence at this duration no longer competes with toileting needs. More importantly, the second fear period has not yet begun (typically six to eight months), so you are training during a window of high neuroplasticity and low fear sensitivity. Work done now is consolidated more durably than work done later.

WHAT TO WATCH FOR

- Camera review showing she settled within five minutes and slept through the rest. Extend to thirty without hesitation.
- Camera review showing she paced the entire absence. Drop back to Weeks 3–4 and rebuild closed-door tolerance for at least a week before re-attempting.
- Accidents in the pen or crate. Almost always a sign that the duration was too long for current bladder capacity, not a behaviour problem. Shorten and rebuild.

First real departure · Review camera every time · Exercise before leaving

WEEKS 7 – 10

Puppy age 14–18 weeks

One to Two Hours, Regularly

*Sixty to one hundred and twenty minutes***THE STAGE**

Errands. A coffee with a friend. A short workout. Lunch out. The duration is now adequate for normal adult-life intervals, and the goal of this stage is consolidation rather than extension — repeat one-to-two-hour absences frequently, in varied contexts, with varied departure cues and varied returning handlers.

This is the most commonly skipped stage. Families see a puppy who handled thirty minutes well and reason that a four-hour stretch must also be fine. It is not. Bladder capacity, behavioural endurance, and the conditioned absence tolerance you have built so far do not extrapolate linearly. Consolidate here for at least three weeks before moving on.

WHY THIS WORKS

Behavioural research on operant learning consistently finds that the strongest predictor of long-term durability is not the peak duration achieved during training but the number of successful repetitions at intermediate duration. The puppy who has done forty successful one-hour absences in varied contexts has a more robust tolerance than the puppy who has done five three-hour absences. This stage is your repetition phase — accumulate volume.

WHAT TO WATCH FOR

- Beginning of adolescence. Around sixteen weeks some puppies show the first signs of the adolescent brain reorganisation that peaks at six to nine months. If she suddenly seems to have forgotten everything, you are not imagining it. Continue the protocol, do not extend duration during the regression.
- Toileting accidents that resume after weeks of cleanliness. Bladder capacity is still developing; eight hours is not a reasonable target until adult capacity is reached at six to eight months.

Consolidate three-plus weeks · Vary the departing handler · Do not skip ahead

WEEKS 11 – 14

Puppy age 18–22 weeks

Two to Four Hours, Building

*One hundred and twenty to two hundred and forty minutes***THE STAGE**

Extension by half-hour increments only. A two-hour absence consolidated for a week, then two and a half, then three. Pair longer absences with a substantial walk or active session beforehand and a high-value food puzzle at departure. By the end of this stage your puppy should be able to handle a four-hour absence comfortably most days.

The departure ritual matters more at this stage than earlier. You are now leaving for genuinely long enough that the puppy notices the difference between “mum is in the bathroom” and “mum is gone for the afternoon.” Keep arrivals and departures low-key. Brief, calm acknowledgement on return. No twenty-minute reunion ceremony — that pattern teaches the puppy that returning is the most exciting moment of the day, which makes the absence preceding it feel correspondingly worse.

WHY THIS WORKS

By eighteen weeks bladder capacity has caught up to four hours in most individuals, and the cumulative repetition volume from Weeks 7–10 has built a deep behavioural baseline. Half-hour extensions allow the new duration to be consolidated before further extension — the slope of the staircase remains shallow even though the absolute duration is now substantial.

WHAT TO WATCH FOR

- Onset of the second fear period. Typically six to eight months but can begin as early as five months. Hallmark: a puppy who was previously confident suddenly startles, becomes wary of familiar things, or shows new fear responses. Hold the duration where it is — do not extend during a fear period.
- Boredom, not distress. By this stage some puppies will begin to vocalise from frustration rather than panic. The camera tells the difference: a frustrated puppy barks, then sleeps. A distressed puppy barks and paces and does not sleep. The intervention is different — boredom is solved with enrichment, distress with a return to the previous stage.

Half-hour increments only · Exercise first · Low-key reunions

WEEKS 15 – 16

Puppy age 22–24 weeks

Toward a Working Day

*Four to six hours***THE STAGE**

By this stage a well-walked puppy with an established absence routine and the consolidated foundation of the previous fourteen weeks can reasonably hold four to six hours during the day. This is not yet an eight-hour working day — do not assume she can hold eight simply because she holds six. Bladder capacity for most Lagottos reaches adult levels at six to eight months, which means the full working day is achievable around month seven of placement, not month four.

Continue the camera review even as the work appears to consolidate. The most common failure mode at this stage is not behavioural regression — it is premature declaration of victory. Families see a settled adolescent at four months home and stop the protocol. The second fear period at six to eight months will then test what was built, and if the foundation is partial, the regression that follows can be substantial.

WHY THIS WORKS

The sixteen-week timeline is calibrated to land just before the second fear period begins. By the time she reaches that developmental window — typically six to eight months of age — she has already accumulated four months of successful absences, multiple departing handlers, varied departure routines, and a deep file of low-stress reference experiences. The fear period will still produce some regression. The depth of the regression depends almost entirely on what you built in the previous sixteen weeks.

WHAT TO WATCH FOR

- The settled-adolescent illusion. At four months home the puppy is calm, the house is intact, the camera shows her sleeping. The work does not end here. Continue camera review at least weekly through the second fear period.
- Eight-hour absences treated as if they were six-hour absences. Bladder capacity is the rate-limiting factor. Build to eight hours over month seven and eight, not month four.
- Any new fear response. A new noise sensitivity, a new wariness of strangers, a new reluctance to enter a previously fine room. Hold absence duration steady until the fear response resolves.

RUNNING IN PARALLEL

The departure-cue counter-protocol

Most distress begins before you have left the house.

Dogs with separation-related behaviour problems usually become distressed before the person has actually left. The trigger is not the absence itself — it is the learned departure sequence that predicts the absence. Shoes, keys, bag, coat, the particular sound a backpack zip makes. The dog learns the sequence over weeks, and once learned, the cue chain alone can produce the full physiological stress response, regardless of whether you actually leave.

RUN THIS PROTOCOL IN PARALLEL WITH THE STAIRCASE

From the first day home, in parallel with the Weeks 1–2 visual-separation work, begin systematically decoupling each departure cue from its consequence. The two protocols are designed to run together: a puppy with perfect tolerance for absence can still be triggered into distress by the departure ritual, simply because the ritual has become a reliable predictor.

This counter-protocol is adapted from the work of Malena DeMartini, CTC, CSAT, founder of the Certified Separation Anxiety Trainer credential and author of *Be Right Back* (2020). DeMartini's central insight is that resolving the cue chain often resolves the apparent absence problem; training absence tolerance without addressing cues works against a conditioning pattern that reasserts itself every morning.

THE FOUR STEPS

Step 1. Identify your cue chain. Write down your typical morning routine in order. For most people: alarm → shower → dress → shoes → keys → bag → coat → door. Be precise. Even the squeak of a particular drawer or the clink of a specific keyring becomes information.

Step 2. Decouple each cue from its consequence. Pick up your keys, then put them down. Walk to the door, do not open it, walk away. Put on your shoes, then take them off. Repeat each cue ten to twenty times per day, at random moments, without actually leaving. The goal is to flood the cue with so many neutral repetitions that its predictive value collapses.

Step 3. Vary the chain on real departures. Until your puppy is neutral to individual cues, change your actual departure routine. Leave through a different door. Carry your keys in a bag. Put your shoes on outside. Make the real-departure sequence different enough from the practised ritual that the puppy cannot use the practised ritual to predict the real departure.

Step 4. Test at the threshold. When she is neutral to individual cues — ears do not prick, body does not orient, breathing does not change — run the full sequence in order without leaving. She should settle before you have finished. Within two to three weeks of consistent decoupling, most puppies show measurable reduction: she does not get up when you put on shoes, does not orient when you pick up keys, does not follow you when you put on a coat. If she is still reacting after three weeks, decouple in lower-stakes contexts (mid-afternoon rather than morning) before resuming.

Daily session log: Weeks 1–6

Record every session for the first six weeks. The log is how you notice gradual change — improvement or regression — that is invisible day to day. Target three to five sessions per day in Weeks 1–4, scaling down as session duration extends. Keep this page on the fridge or beside the camera display; the act of recording is itself part of the training.

[illegible]

LOG TWO

Weekly summary log: Weeks 7–16

The consolidation phase. One summary per week.

From Week 7 onward, sessions are longer and less frequent — typically one to three per day. A weekly summary log is more useful than a daily one at this scale. Record the longest absence achieved that week, the camera-review outcome, and any back-up to a previous stage. The pattern across weeks tells you whether the trajectory is forward, plateau, or regression.

Week	Stage	Longest absence	Camera review	Back-up?	Notes
Week 7					
Week 8					
Week 9					
Week 10					
Week 11					
Week 12					
Week 13					
Week 14					
Week 15					
Week 16					

LOG THREE

Camera review prompts

What to watch for after every session.

The camera is the diagnostic instrument. The state of the house when you return tells you almost nothing — destruction is a lagging indicator, elimination is ambiguous, and the puppy's greeting is calibrated to your arrival, not to what happened during the absence. Review the first twenty minutes of footage after every session in the first four weeks, and at least the first ten minutes of every session through Week 16.

CAMERA REVIEW PROMPTS

- ☐ **Did she settle within five minutes?** A settled puppy lies down, often with a sigh, and either sleeps or chews quietly. Pacing for the first twenty minutes is not settling.
- ☐ **Did she sleep for the majority of the absence?** A sleeping puppy is the gold standard. A puppy who is awake but quiet is acceptable. A puppy who is awake and moving is below standard.
- ☐ **Was there vocalisation — and did it resolve?** Brief vocalisation in the first minute is normal and resolves. Sustained vocalisation that escalates is a sign you are over threshold.
- ☐ **Was there pacing, destruction, or elimination?** Pacing is the earliest reliable sign of distress. Destruction at exit points (door frames, window sills) is more diagnostic than destruction of accessible objects (slippers, paper).
- ☐ **Did she return to her normal resting spot?** A puppy who chooses her bed during your absence is settled. A puppy who stations herself at the door and does not move is not.
- ☐ **Were there changes from the previous session?** Trend matters more than any single session. A worse session after three good ones is a flag, not a crisis. Three worse sessions in a row is a back-up signal.

Second fear period observation log

The second fear period typically arrives between six and eight months and lasts two to four weeks. During this window, previously confident behaviours may regress, new fear responses may emerge, and absence tolerance may temporarily decline. This is developmental, not a training failure. Hold duration steady, re-introduce a chew at departure, and review the camera with renewed attention. Most regressions resolve within a month.

[illegible]

TROUBLESHOOTING

When she struggles

A decision tree for the most common patterns.

Every puppy will struggle at some point in the protocol. Struggle is not failure; it is information. The decision tree below covers the most common patterns and the corresponding adjustments. When in doubt, the rule is always: back up one stage, rebuild for one week, re-attempt.

She panicked during a session.	Return immediately, briefly and calmly. End the session. Do not run another absence that day. Tomorrow, drop back to the previous stage and consolidate for at least three days before re-attempting the failed stage.
She is fine for ten minutes and then falls apart.	Duration was too long, not the stage too advanced. Run the same stage at the duration she tolerated yesterday for one full week before extending — even by a single minute.
She refuses the chew when I leave.	She is over threshold before you have left. The cue chain is doing the work. Run the departure-cue counter-protocol for two weeks before resuming the staircase, and during that period drop back two stages.
Camera shows her pacing the whole absence, but no vocalisation.	Quiet pacing is still distress. Silent dogs are not always settled dogs. Treat as a failure and back up.
She vocalises briefly on departure, then settles.	Normal in early stages. Wait until she is quiet for at least sixty seconds before returning. Never reward vocalisation by appearing during it.
Three weeks in and we are still on Weeks 1–2.	This is fine. The staircase is a typical timeline, not a required pace. A puppy with high baseline sensitivity may need four to six weeks at the visual-separation stage. Do not push.
She regressed at five months even though Week 16 went well.	Second fear period. Predictable. Hold duration steady, re-introduce a chew at departure, and resume the protocol's last stage when the regression resolves — usually within two to four weeks.
Nothing is working. Two months in, she still panics at the door.	Stop the staircase. The next page covers when professional help is appropriate. This is one of those situations.

WHEN TO ESCALATE

When to seek professional help

Four credentials, in increasing order of clinical depth.

Most separation issues respond to the protocol on this fridge. Some do not, and the difference is usually visible within sixty days. The credentials below — listed in increasing order of clinical depth — are the people to contact when the protocol alone is not sufficient. The wrong intervention for a clinical case is usually worse than no intervention; the right intervention is often transformational. Knowing who is the right person is half the battle.

CSAT *Certified Separation Anxiety Trainer*

DeMartini's certification, the field-leading credential for separation-related behaviour. Six-month curriculum, case-based assessment, ongoing professional development. CSATs work primarily by remote consultation — they review your camera footage, prescribe specific protocols, and adjust week by week. Typically the right first call when the staircase has stalled at the closed-door stage or earlier. Find one at malenademartini.com.

CDBC *Certified Dog Behavior Consultant, IAABC*

More general behavioural consulting credential. CDBCs handle separation-related cases alongside aggression, reactivity, and complex behaviour. The right call when the separation issue is paired with other concerns (resource guarding, leash reactivity, multi-dog household dynamics). Find one at iaabc.org.

CAAB / ACAAB *Certified Applied Animal Behaviorist*

PhD or master's-level credential from the Animal Behavior Society. Rare — fewer than seventy in North America. Appropriate for genuinely complex cases or for owners who want the most rigorous available diagnostic. Often consults remotely and works alongside your veterinarian. Find one at animalbehaviorsociety.org.

DACVB *Diplomate, American College of Veterinary Behaviorists*

Board-certified veterinary behaviourist. The medical-grade credential, and the only one that can prescribe medication directly. Reserved for cases involving severe panic, self-injury during absences, or anxiety severe enough that pharmacological support (typically fluoxetine, sometimes situational benzodiazepines) is appropriate alongside behavioural work. Find one at dacvb.org.

When in doubt: a CSAT first, a CDBC if the picture is broader, a DACVB if panic is severe or your veterinarian raises medication. We can refer directly within the Northwest Lagotto network — placed families have access to a curated list of practitioners we have worked with.

FURTHER READING

The work behind the protocol

Five sources that ground every recommendation in this document.

The protocol on this fridge stands on the work of others. The list below is the source material — the books, papers, and position statements behind the specific recommendations. Read in order: *Be Right Back* first if you are working through an active case, *I'll Be Home Soon* first if you are in prevention mode, the AVSAB statement before any conversation about punishment-based bark deterrents.

BOOK · CORNERSTONE

Be Right Back

Malena DeMartini, CTC, CSAT

The cornerstone clinical reference on canine separation anxiety. DeMartini founded the CSAT credential and has consulted on separation cases for over two decades. *Be Right Back* (2020) consolidates her programme into a single accessible volume — and is the source for the cue-chain decoupling protocol in this document.

BOOKLET · PREVENTION

I'll Be Home Soon: How to Prevent and Treat Separation Anxiety

Patricia McConnell, PhD, CAAB

A short, focused booklet on prevention. Particularly relevant for Lagotto families because the breed's velcro temperament occupies the grey zone between strong attachment and clinical anxiety, and McConnell's framing is the clearest available on what distinguishes one from the other.

RESEARCH · PREVALENCE

Salonen, Sulkama, Mikkola, et al.

University of Helsinki, 2020

The largest behavioural survey ever conducted in dogs (n=13,715, 264 breeds). Established a 5% baseline prevalence of owner-reported separation-related behaviour — the population-level reference point against which Lagotto-specific risk should be evaluated.

RESEARCH · COHORT

Pandemic Puppies cohort study

Royal Veterinary College, 2024

Cohort of 985 dogs acquired during UK pandemic lockdowns, assessed at 21 months. Found 31% prevalence of separation-related behaviour — roughly six times the pre-pandemic baseline. Underscores the prevention-first framing of this protocol.

POSITION STATEMENT · FREE PDF

AVSAB Position Statement on Humane Dog Training

American Veterinary Society of Animal Behavior

Four-page paper from the certifying body for veterinary behaviourists. Establishes the evidence against aversive methods. The document to cite when a friend suggests a citronella collar or shock-based bark deterrent. Free at avsab.org.

BY OMISSION

What is deliberately not in this protocol

And the reasoning behind each omission.

Some practices that appear in popular advice on separation anxiety are absent from this protocol. Their omission is deliberate and grounded in the behavioural and welfare science. We list them here so you know what we have left out and why.

Flooding	Forcing the dog through long absences past her threshold, on the theory that she will eventually “learn it is fine.” Repeated above-threshold exposure produces learned helplessness, not tolerance — and is associated with worse long-term outcomes than no intervention at all.
“Cry it out” advice	The folk recommendation that owners ignore vocalisation and the puppy will “self-soothe.” This conflates infant sleep training with canine separation distress, which are biologically and developmentally distinct. The protocol on this fridge is the opposite: stay below threshold, return before distress escalates.
Citronella, ultrasonic, or shock bark deterrents	Aversive bark-suppression devices do not address underlying distress; they suppress the symptom by adding a second source of fear. Suppressed barking is not resolved anxiety. The AVSAB position statement on humane training is unambiguous on this.
Confinement until exhaustion	Some advice suggests crating for long durations on the theory that the puppy will eventually “give up.” She will eventually stop vocalising. She will not stop being distressed. The two are different.
Fluoxetine without veterinary behaviourist input	SSRI medication can be transformational in genuine clinical cases. We do not include medication in this protocol because the appropriate clinical decision belongs with a DACVB or CSAT-veterinary partnership, and because medication without behavioural work is rarely sufficient. Where appropriate, the path runs through one of the credentials on the previous page.
Adding a second dog “to keep her company”	A second dog does not resolve separation distress in the first dog. It doubles the household management load, and in roughly half of cases the second dog acquires the first dog’s anxious response through observational learning. There are good reasons to add a second dog. Treating the first dog’s separation anxiety is not one of them.

We believe families deserve clarity rather than a balanced selection of conflicting advice. The behavioural science on separation distress in dogs is unsettled in some places and entirely settled in others. Where it is settled, we do not soften the position to accommodate folk practice.

NORTHWEST LAGOTTO

Lynden, Washington · nwlagotto.com

This protocol is reviewed and updated periodically. Always consult the latest edition.