Meeting The Needs of "Home Alone" Dogs

When their owners are away, unattended dogs' needs boil down to issues of safety, comfort and quality of life. These dogs require a secure environment where they will be safe from injury and not be able to damage their owners' property. They also need comfortable surroundings where they can relax without exposure to excessive heat, cold or dampness. Finally, they must be kept in an environment that does not severely restrict their need for activity and mental stimulation.

When pet owners know they must leave their dogs for long periods, the inclination of many is to keep their pets outdoors. In most cases, this is an undesirable solution. A dog that is tethered and unsupervised can easily become the victim of theft. He also may be subject to attack or teasing by roaming animals. Abuse by neighborhood youngsters, or even by sadistic adults, is another danger.

Behavioral problems can also arise from tethering. A tethered dog is often a bored dog, and bored dogs dig. Tethering can also promote aggressive behavior. Like all animals, dogs respond to a perceived threat either by fleeing or fighting. When a chained dog feels threatened, he lacks the option of flight and, therefore, is much more likely to respond aggressively to an intruder, even an innocent one.

Fencing, either traditional or electronic, offers a somewhat better alternative. Owners must remember; however, that short of maximum security prison type measures, no fence can prevent escaping by a sufficiently determined dog. Nor is it proof against intrusion by a sufficiently determined thief or animal abuser. Electronic fencing may keep a dog in, but it will not keep roaming animals out.

Safer Inside

Home alone dogs can be kept more secure indoors. Unless the dog in question is a perfect angel with regard to destructive chewing and house-soiling, he shouldn't be given complete freedom of the premises. For periods of four hours or less, confinement to a crate provides a safe and humane solution. For longer stretches of time, confinement to a "safe room" such as a kitchen is the kind thing to do. Exercise pens for small dogs and sturdy baby gates for larger pets will assure that dogs stay where owners want them.

The comfort issue is easy to resolve for dogs that remain indoors. They should be kept in heated areas during cold climates and in air-conditioned rooms in warm climates. Areas such as cold, damp cellars and freezing or broiling garages must be off-limits. Beyond that, indoor pets need only a blanket or dog bed to curl up on and access to water. Bowls that are tip-resistant will prevent mischievous dogs from spilling their day's water supply in the process of entertaining themselves.

Outdoor dogs need shelter in the form of a doghouse with clean bedding. Their runs should be positioned in an area that affords summer shade. They, too, need access to water, preferable from a vessel that will neither get too hot in the summer nor freeze in winter. For the inveterate bowl tipper or the canine that's part camel, owners should consider pet water fountains that attach to an outside tap for a limitless supply of water.

Dogs' quality of life needs are related in large part to confinement. All dogs, even puppies and young adults, spend enviable amounts of their days in nap mode. That's why short-term crating affords a humane method of confinement. But all dogs need to get up and move around during the day. Hence, the recommendation for long-term confinement in larger areas. Nonetheless, owners should remember that after a long day of isolation and inactivity, dogs need and deserve exercise and attention from their people.

Selecting The Right Toy

To help them pass their solitary time, home alone dogs can benefit from toys of various types. The essential point to keep in mind when suggesting toys that will be used by unsupervised animals is safety. Some dogs are greedy, aggressive chewers. For them, a rawhide bone, a latex squeak toy or fabric toy that would be perfectly safe between the jaws of a more laid-back pet could spell gastrointestinal disaster. Hard rubber, nylon and rope toys all offer high degrees of safety; however, even these nearly indestructible items must be selected in a size appropriate to the dog's own size and its level of chewing aggressiveness.

Dogs that are made anxious by separation or confinement can benefit from soothing or distracting environmental stimuli. Leaving on a radio, tuned to an easy listening or classical station, can have a soothing effect on nervous pets. Some can also be entertained and distracted by watching television, particularly nature programs that feature a lot of animal activity.

Keep safety, comfort and quality of life in mind, and you'll be well equipped to help customers meet the needs of their "latch-key" pets. ❑