

Empty Nest Blues

Help your dog cope when a family member heads off to school.

By Susan McCullough

This September, my family faces a big change: My daughter Julie is leaving home for college. My husband Stan and I are proud of her, but we also feel a little melancholy over the emptying of our nest. As for Julie, she's torn between wanting to go and wondering how she'll do once she gets to college. I wonder that too, but I'm also concerned about how her departure will affect Allie, our Golden Retriever.

Experts say my concern is justified. A dog who's dealing with a loved one's departure may get depressed, just like a person would. Signs of doggie depression include eating less, interacting less with remaining family members, sleeping more, and engaging in destructive behaviors. "I have no doubt that dogs are capable of experiencing depression," says certified applied animal behaviorist Alice Moon-Fanelli, Ph.D, of Tufts University in North Grafton, Mass.

Veterinary behaviorist Terry Curtis, DVM, of the University of Florida warns that a left-behind dog could show signs of separation anxiety, "especially if the person who left was the dog's primary attachment figure. And the dog could be clingier to those family members left at home."

Fortunately, we can limit the stress our dogs may feel when someone leaves the family fold. Curtis recommends that remaining family members take over dog activities from the departing person — before that person actually leaves. "This could include taking the dog on walks, playing with the dog, or giving the dog treats, she says. Curtis also suggests that the soon-to-depart person spend more time away from the house so the dog can gradually get used to her absence.

But we shouldn't stop there. We can also help our dogs cope with the aftermath of the departure. Moon-Fanelli stresses the importance of making sure that the dog has a "routinely fulfilling day with plenty of exercise, attention, and various forms of environmental enrichment." Just as with people, extra activity and attention go a long way toward lifting a dog's spirits. Of course, if those measures don't do the trick, a visit to the vet is in order. A case of canine blues that doesn't lift may actually be a symptom of another condition.

With that expert advice in mind, Stan and I have been taking steps to help Allie cope with Julie's imminent departure. For example, he and I are taking over the nighttime walks that Julie had been giving Allie. And when Julie's actually gone, I'll step up the fun and games that Allie and I engage in, from extra ball-retrieving sessions in the local park to teaching her a few new tricks. There may be a bonus in that extra activity for me, too. By having more fun with Allie, I might not miss Julie quite as much.

Meanwhile, I'll put Julie's mind at ease over one worry she has about leaving home: whether Allie will recognize her when she comes back. "Absolutely dogs remember family members when they return," Moon-Fanelli says. Julie will be glad to hear that.

Award-winning writer Susan McCullough lives with her husband, daughter, and dog in Virginia.

This article first appeared in the September 2007 issue of DOG FANCY.