

Home alone

Teaching puppies to keep their own company

BY JESS ALLSOP


Teaching your puppy to enjoy time spent at home alone is critical to its long-term psychological wellbeing. Although you may wish to take your dog with you everywhere you go, in reality most dogs need to be left home alone at some time during their lives. There are some places where it's just not appropriate or safe to take dogs, so puppies need to learn to appreciate their own company.

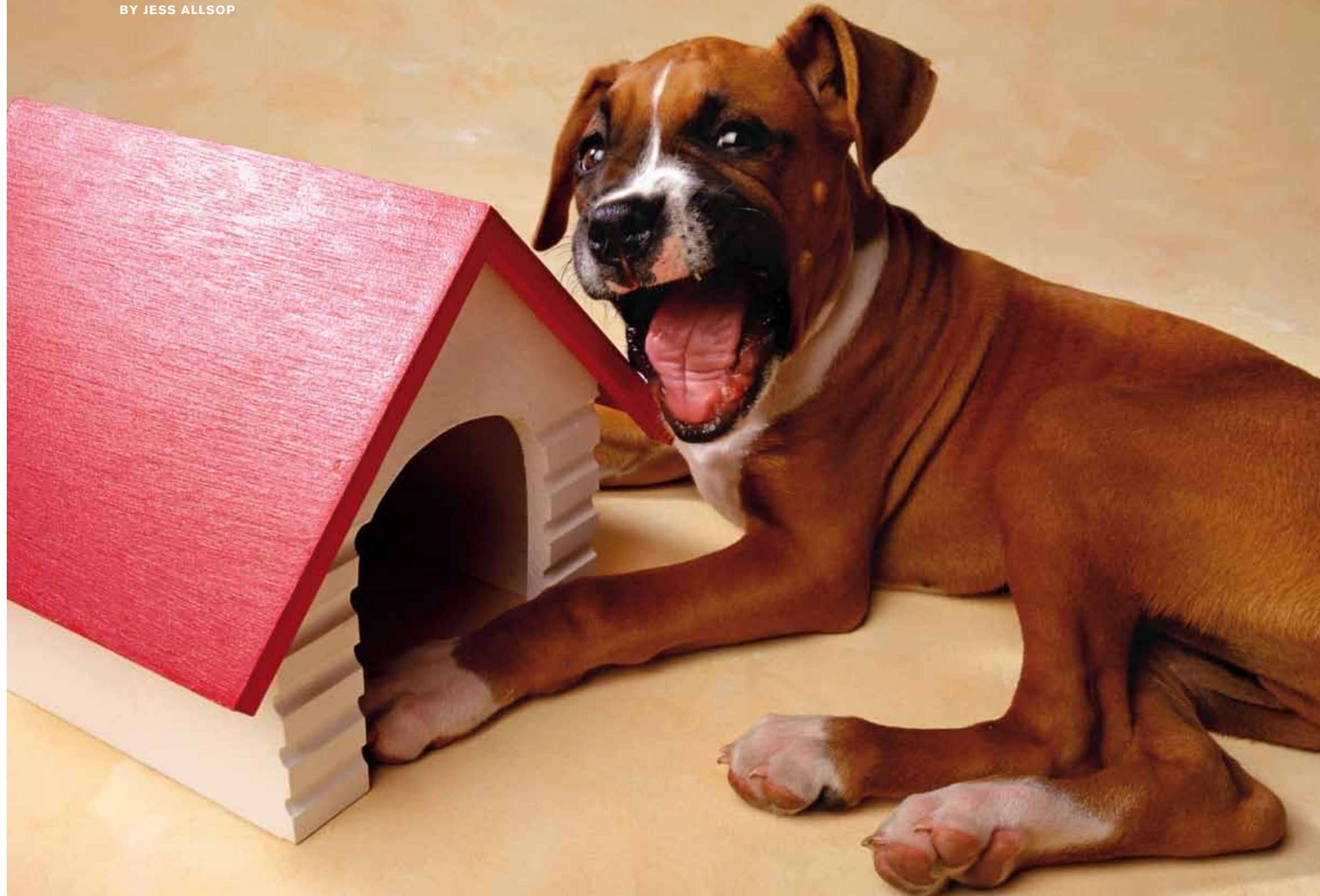
Dogs are creatures of habit, and it's important to create the right habits as soon as possible. Don't wait until your puppy gets older and wiser and is confident in the fact that you'll always be there to hold its paw if needed! Begin by preparing your puppy for your eventual absence by training it to spend time off your knee and on the other side of the room.

Ensure you downplay your arrival at home so your pup doesn't feel like it's missed out on any excitement during your absence. Resist the urge to greet your dog until it has calmed down and has four paws on the floor. Use a calm voice and gentle stroking – save the exciting games for playtime. Your non-dog-loving friends will definitely appreciate the calmer greeting – and so will you when your arms are full of shopping bags!

Because dogs love a den or safe haven, I suggest incorporating feeding into the area where you wish your puppy to spend its days. A crate is ideal to give your puppy a quiet, safe place to rest, as well as a perfect spot for some occupational therapy, or chewing. Teach your puppy to enjoy spending time in the crate by removing its food bowl, stuffing a Kong or similar toys with its daily ration of food, and leaving it inside the crate when you leave for work. This way you will train your dog to enjoy its time alone, look forward to your departure, and at the same time satisfy its chewing need on purpose-made toys instead of your shoes or furniture. Dogs that are busy extricating their daily food ration from specialised toys are far less likely to bark and dig (and drive your neighbours crazy)!

Dogs have two activity peaks during the day: morning and evening. Make the most of these peaks by exercising your dog at these times, then feeding it after. If you walk your puppy in the morning, then give its food toy as you leave for work, your pup will settle down, eat breakfast and sleep away a good portion of the day. The same process can be repeated in the evening.

Remember that older dogs can learn new tricks! There is no need for your dog to continue thinking that home-alone time is scary or boring. You can re-train your dog by using the above ideas. Start by training your dog when you're at home, encouraging it to spend time inside when you are outside and on the other side of the room. Treat yourself to some privacy, close the door when you use the bathroom and even remove your dog to another room when you cook your dinner. Start with small changes and persevere. Having a dog that is content to spend time on its own will ensure both a happy dog and a happy owner. 



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