

Canine Empty Nesters – Missing the Kids

Guelph, ON

Dogs are highly intuitive and sensitive animals. If they have a close bond with a family member who is moving away for college or university, the dog will often go through some behavioural changes as a result.

While our canine companions may not understand the full extent of human absence, they do seem to understand the emotional feeling of missing someone who is no longer a part of their daily lives. For dogs, often it is the change of routine, as well as the absence of the person's sensations (sight, sound, smell) that easily convey that something is very different.

Andria Gordon is a Registered Veterinary Technician (RVT) who is specializing in the field of Behaviour. Andria says that all dogs are unique individuals, and not all will exhibit the same signs of "missing" a family member. However, the most common signs are:

- listlessness/clinginess
- lack of energy
- loss of appetite
- weight loss

"Anxiety and stress can present themselves in a variety of ways," Andria explains. "Signs to be aware of are things such as whining, panting, fidgeting, barking or pacing."



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Andria recommends that families provide as much structure and predictability as possible for the dog. Keep feeding and walking times consistent, as well as sleeping areas.

"If the children were involved in the daily feeding and walking, I recommend family members share these duties prior to the kids' departure, so that the routine isn't changing all of a sudden for the dog," Andria says. "Remaining family members should provide comfort by spending more time with the dog."

Increasing enrichment during the transition period can also be helpful. Consider play dates with other dogs, adding feeding/activity toys, or short fun training sessions to keep the dog engaged.

How long a dog grieves varies by individual. Most dogs will adjust to their "new normal" over time with the support of the remaining family members. In many cases, there are happy reunions when their family members return home for the holidays!

Andria encourages changes to be incorporated gradually before the departure of the family member so that there is consistency for the dog and there is time to adjust to the new routine.

At the first sign of a decline in physical or emotional health, always consult your veterinary healthcare team to ensure that the signs of grief/loss are not masking a physical illness.

For more information:

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