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**Back to School**  
**Helping Your Dog Make the Transition**  
**from Summer to Fall**

Summer has ended and the kids are back in school. For parents, this time of year often means that some peace and quiet return to their days as the kids return to school. For many family dogs, however, it means a complete upheaval of their lives! Rover spent the whole summer chasing the kids around and having constant companions during the day. Suddenly, his playmates have disappeared for large portions of the day. Even families without children tend to have a more relaxed “dog-friendly” schedule during the long days of summer. But in September, the “dog days” of summer have ended in more ways than one!

I have seen many dogs develop or intensify unusual and/or negative behavior in the autumn. Although these behaviors may at first seem puzzling, more often than not they are simply a result of stress and/or unmet needs. All summer, your dog enjoyed the interaction of your summertime comings and goings; now, he suddenly finds himself alone in a quiet empty house.

The stress of this change in routine and environment can lead to negative behaviors. If not addressed quickly and effectively, these undesirable behaviors can, unfortunately, become lifelong habits.

**Understanding the Problem**

When you first brought your dog home and began training, you addressed your dog’s basic needs.

- A leader (you!) and a clearly established place in a group
- Clear and consistent behavioral expectations
- Sufficient exercise and mental stimulation

A change in schedule and environment is stressful enough for your dog, but the changes as summer moves into fall may also mean that some of these basic needs are getting lost in the shuffle.

**Loneliness** Dogs are pack animals, so sometimes just the feeling of being alone makes them anxious. This anxiety may manifest in a number of undesirable behaviors, but one of the most common is chewing. It is significant that when a

dog chews, he usually selects an item that has the most scent from his “pack” on it. Consequently, if your dog is missing the presence of family members when they return to school or work, he may soothe himself by chewing on items such as shoes, toys, or clothing that strongly carry their scent.

**Lack of Leadership** Your dog may also feel stress in the absence of a leader. Your dog looks to you for rules and boundaries. If you have been home during the summer guiding his behavior he will feel stress if he is now alone in the house and making his own decisions. For instance, he may wonder, “Should I sit on the couch?” If you have relaxed some rules over the summer, your dog may be unclear about what is and is not permitted as you return to your regular routine in the fall. Without you there to direct him, his stress increases until he just wants to eliminate the source of the stress. In other words, a dog that is suddenly left home alone may decide to eat your couch rather than sit on it.

**Boredom** Finally, as summer ends and your dog has fewer diversions and activities, he may simply become bored lying around the house. Dogs are, by nature, working animals. Their wild ancestors spent most of their time traveling and tracking to get food. As humans domesticated dogs, specific breeds were bred to have specific traits for specific jobs such as herding, guarding, carrying, or hunting, Dogs need work to do and challenges to engage them. A dog that is left home alone for eight hours and then given a quick walk around the neighborhood or a run in the yard is not getting enough physical or mental stimulation.

### **Addressing the Problem**

You can't be home all the time to provide companionship and direction for your dog. However, you can take steps to ease the transition from summer to fall.

- Re-establish consistent rules and routines.
- Ensure that your dog continues to get sufficient exercise.
- Provide activities that engage your dog's mental and physical energy.

**Learn New Things** Fall is “back to school” time, so consider taking your dog back to school! Teaching anything from tricks to simple obedience commands will give your dog a focus for his thought processes to over-ride negative behavior.

Obedience classes teach your dog self-control and also allow him to think and respond. In other words, obedience class gives your dog “work.” Whether you've had your dog a few months or a few years, a basic obedience class provides numerous benefits in both bonding and behavior improvement.

Advanced classes or sport classes are appropriate if your dog is already proficient in basic obedience,. These classes can keep him “tuned up” by engaging his mind with new challenges. Advanced and sport classes are not just

for competition. These classes are also a great way to strengthen your bond with your dog and keep him physically and mentally active. Dogs are constantly thinking and trying to figure out what their next move should be. If you do not direct the focus toward positive outcomes, you can be sure that your dog will entertain himself with negative behavior.

- **Advanced obedience classes** will provide opportunities to learn useful behaviors and manners beyond the basic sit, stay, and come. These classes will enhance your dog's self control and will renew your dog's focus on your leadership. Practicing new behaviors and skills will fulfill your dog's need for mental stimulation.
- **Agility classes** can provide a great outlet for your dog's physical and mental energy through the long winter. These classes are fun and fast-paced sessions that fulfill a high-energy dog's need for exercise and mental challenges.
- **Rally classes** are a good mix of physical and mental exercise. The activities in these classes will reinforce your leadership role while also fulfilling your dog's need for physical and mental challenges.
- **Trick training** can provide less active dogs with the mental challenges that keep them engaged and focused on positive behaviors. Whether you find a formal class for teaching your dog tricks or simply choose a few tricks to teach during the winter months, trick training is a fun way to provide your dog with mental challenges.

**Make New Friends** Remember, dogs are pack animals and often feel stress when left alone. Different dogs have different levels of tolerance for being left alone, but all dogs need companionship and interaction. If your schedule requires you to be away from home for extended periods of the day, doggie daycare can provide the social interaction that your dog needs. The shift from summer to fall is a good time to evaluate whether your dog would benefit from some time in a daycare setting. For the maximum benefit, make sure the day care has the following features.

- Provides some training, formal games, or other form of mental challenge during the day. Make sure the humans spend some time directing and guiding the activities of the dogs, rather than just letting them chase each other around. It is this human directed interaction that ensures your dog will experience challenges that stimulate him mentally.
- Provides playtime with dogs of similar size, temperament, and energy level. Your dog will get the best physical outlet if he feels comfortable and secure with his daycare "pack."
- Provides an outdoor area for eliminating. Often, I have heard from owners who find their dogs are suddenly having accidents in the

house after they have been attending doggie daycare. Usually, a little investigation reveals that the dogs are allowed to “go” indoors at the daycare, undermining the housebreaking expectations at home.

You may find that your dog experiences higher than normal stress at being left alone at times when your routine or schedule changes (such as when summer gives way to fall)! Most day cares have a “day rate” which would allow you to utilize the facility more frequently during times when your dog needs more social interaction. As you and your dog adjust to the changes from your summer routine to your fall schedule, you may find that your dog benefits from attending day care several times during the week. Similarly, if during the winter there are stretches of weather that prevent you from getting the usual amount of outdoor exercise, you might increase the day care visits to ensure your dog is getting adequate physical activity. Doggie daycare is no substitute for your company and leadership, but can be a helpful tool for fulfilling your dog’s need for social interaction, physical exercise, and mental stimulation.

## **Conclusion**

No matter what the season or schedule, your dog has some non-negotiable needs that must always be met. During times when your routine changes or some other event or circumstance interrupts your dog’s regular schedule or environment, it is vital that you review those needs and address any gaps. As you move from summer to fall, evaluate how well your fall schedule is meeting your dog’s needs.

- A leader and a clearly established place in a group
- Clear and consistent behavioral expectations
- Sufficient exercise and mental stimulation

Remember, all exercise or all work will not control negative behavior. Each day, your dog needs at least 40 minutes to an hour of exercise and play (retrieving, running, etc.) and a half hour of training. When your routine includes a happy medium of exercise, play, and training, your dog will be happy and well adjusted. Autumn still has some beautiful days when you will be able to get out and go hiking or walking with your dog. However, it is up to you to ensure that you provide enough other exercise and mental stimulation as the seasons and your schedule change. Your dog’s mental well-being, as well as your own, is in your hands!

## **About Beth Bradley**

Beth Bradley began studying animal behavior and dog training at age 12. She has worked and studied under many renowned animal behaviorists and trainers.

After graduating from Rutgers University with a Bachelor of Arts in Sociology and Criminal Justice, Beth worked as a New Jersey State Animal Control Officer. In 1989, she founded her own company and has made dog training and consulting her full-time career since 1995. She is the author of *Real World Dog Training*, and has produced a number of training CDs and DVDs Beth competes with her own dogs in Schutzhund and AKC Obedience. She holds national and international titles, championships, and honors, including representing the United States in the FCI World Trials in both 2003 and 2009. Beth consults for New Jersey shelters and New Jersey law enforcement on cases involving canine behavior and temperament. In addition, she trains and handles dogs for movies and television, with recent credits including *Board Walk Empire*, the *Batman* franchise, *Blue Bloods*, and *The Good Wife*.

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