

# The Sixteen-Week *Absence Protocol*

*From seconds to a working day — one rung at a time.*

A printable companion to the Northwest Lagotto separation essay. The full staircase, daily logs, camera-review prompts, and the departure-cue counter-protocol — designed to live on the fridge for the first four months your puppy is home.

## The Sixteen-Week Absence Staircase

This protocol begins the day your puppy comes home at eight weeks and runs through week twenty-four of her life. Every NWL puppy has already had her first introduction to absence before she leaves — this document is where you continue that work.

### Three rules that govern the entire protocol:

1. Never extend an absence past what your puppy can tolerate without distress. The camera tells you the truth — use it honestly.
2. When she fails, back up to the previous stage and rebuild. Slow is faster than fast because every panic episode reinforces the wrong association.
3. Walk every rung in order. Do not skip. Consolidate each stage before extending.

### THE STAIRCASE

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#### *Weeks 1–2* Puppy age 8–10 weeks

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##### **Visual Separation — Seconds to Minutes**

Baby gate between you and the puppy. You in the next room, clearly visible, not interacting. Start at ten seconds. Build to two minutes over the week. Crate in the bedroom at night, open during the day. The puppy sees where you are; she just cannot reach you. Return before she becomes distressed.

*Gate, not door · Sub-threshold only · Bedroom crate at night*

#### *Weeks 3–4* Puppy age 10–12 weeks

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##### **Out of Sight — Five to Ten Minutes**

Now the barrier is a closed door. Puppy in her pen or crate with a Kong or a long-lasting chew. You leave the room. Five minutes, then ten. Return before she vocalises more than briefly. If she panics, drop back to the Week 1–2 stage and rebuild. Never "just a bit longer."

*Add chew at departure · Camera on · No greetings until calm*

## Weeks 5–6

Puppy age 12–14 weeks

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### Leave the House — Twenty to Thirty Minutes

First actual departures. Walk to the mailbox. Sit on the porch. Take a short loop around the block. Twenty minutes, then thirty. Review the camera every time. If she settles within five minutes and sleeps for the remainder, extend. If she paces the entire time, shorten.

*First real departure · Review camera on return · Exercise before leaving*

## Weeks 7–10

Puppy age 14–18 weeks

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### One to Two Hours — Regularly

Errands. Lunch out. A coffee with a friend. Bladder capacity is now adequate for this duration. Monitor for accidents and scale back if needed. This is the stage where many families get complacent and skip ahead. Do not. Consolidate here for at least three weeks before lengthening.

*Consolidate 3+ weeks · Bladder check · Do not skip ahead*

## Weeks 11–14

Puppy age 18–22 weeks

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### Two to Four Hours — Building Up

Extend by half-hour increments. Pair longer absences with a good walk beforehand and a food puzzle at departure. Camera review continues to be the honest metric. A puppy sleeping most of a three-hour absence can extend to four. A puppy still pacing at hour two cannot.

*Exercise first · Food puzzle at departure · Half-hour increments only*

## Weeks 15–16

Puppy age 22–24 weeks

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### Four to Six Hours — Toward a Working Day

By now a well-walked puppy with an established absence routine can hold four to six hours comfortably. Do not assume she can hold eight simply because she holds six. Continue to use the camera. Premature declarations of victory are the most common failure mode — the family sees a settled adolescent at four months and stops the protocol. The second fear period at six to eight months will test what was built here.

*Full working day target · Continue camera review · Watch second fear period (6–8 months)*

## The Departure-Cue Counter-Protocol

Dogs with separation-related behaviour problems usually become distressed before the person has actually left. The trigger is not the absence — it is the learned departure sequence: shoes, keys, bag, coat. Run this counter-protocol from week one, in parallel with the staircase.

- 1. Identify your cue chain.** Write down your typical morning routine in order. For most people: alarm → shower → dress → shoes → keys → bag → door. The dog learns this sequence predicts departure.
- 2. Decouple each cue from its consequence.** Pick up your keys, put them down. Walk to the door, do not open it, walk away. Put on shoes, sit down and watch television. Repeat each cue 10–20 times per day, at random moments, without actually leaving.
- 3. Do not use departure cues on real departures until the dog is neutral.** Until she shows no reaction to keys, bag, or door individually, vary your actual departure routine — leave through a different door, carry keys in a bag. Reduce the predictive power of the chain.
- 4. Test at the threshold.** Once she is neutral to individual cues, run the full sequence without leaving. She should settle before you have finished. Only then begin using the routine on real departures.

### A NOTE ON THE PROTOCOL

This counter-protocol is adapted from Malena DeMartini's separation anxiety programme — the most evidence-supported approach for canine separation anxiety. The key insight: resolve the cues and the absence is often tolerable. Try to fix the absence without touching the cues and you are working against a conditioning pattern that reasserts itself every morning.

**DAILY LOG — WEEKS 1 & 2**

*Record each session. The log is how you notice gradual improvement (or regression) that is invisible day to day.  
Target: 3–5 sessions per day in weeks 1–2.*

Date	Session	Duration	Settled?	Distress signs	Notes
	1	___ min / sec	■ Yes ■ No		
	2	___ min / sec	■ Yes ■ No		
	3	___ min / sec	■ Yes ■ No		
	4	___ min / sec	■ Yes ■ No		
	5	___ min / sec	■ Yes ■ No		
	6	___ min / sec	■ Yes ■ No		
	7	___ min / sec	■ Yes ■ No		
	8	___ min / sec	■ Yes ■ No		
	9	___ min / sec	■ Yes ■ No		
	10	___ min / sec	■ Yes ■ No		
	11	___ min / sec	■ Yes ■ No		
	12	___ min / sec	■ Yes ■ No		
	13	___ min / sec	■ Yes ■ No		
	14	___ min / sec	■ Yes ■ No		

**CAMERA REVIEW PROMPTS**

- Did she settle within 5 minutes of departure?
- Did she sleep for the majority of the absence?
- Was there vocalisation — and did it resolve, or persist?
- Was there pacing, destruction, or elimination?
- Did she go to her normal resting spot?

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