BEHAVIOR SERIES

Dogs: Destructive Chewing

SOONER OR LATER EVERY DOG LOVER returns home to find some unexpected damage inflicted by his or her dog . . . or, more specifically, that dog's incisors and molars. Although dogs make great use of their vision and sense of smell to explore the world, one of their favorite ways to take in new information is to put their mouths to work.

Fortunately, chewing can be directed onto appropriate items so your dog isn't destroying items you value or jeopardizing his own safety. Until he's learned what he can and can't chew, however, you need to manage the situation as much as possible so he doesn't have the opportunity to chew on unacceptable objects.

Taking Control by Managing the Situation

- Take responsibility for your own belongings: If you don't want it in your dog's mouth, don't make it available. Keep clothing, shoes, books, trash, eyeglasses, and remote control devices out of your dog's reach.
- Don't confuse your dog by offering him shoes and socks as toys and then expecting him to distinguish between his shoe and yours. Your dog's toys should be clearly distinguishable from household goods.
- Until your dog learns the house rules, confine him when you're unable to keep an eye on him. Choose a "safe place" that's dog proof, and provide fresh water and "safe" toys. If your dog is crate trained, you may also place him in his crate for short periods of time.
- Give your dog plenty of your time and attention. Your dog won't know how to behave if you don't teach him alternatives to inappropriate behavior, and he can't learn these when he's in the yard by himself.
- If you catch your dog chewing on something he shouldn't, interrupt the behavior with a loud noise, offer him an acceptable chew toy instead, and praise him lavishly when he takes the toy in his mouth.
- Have realistic expectations. At some point your dog will inevitably chew up something you value; this is often part of the transition to a new home. Your dog needs time to learn the house rules and you need to remember to take precautions and keep things out of his reach.

Chewing is normal behavior for curious puppies who may be teething, but adult dogs may engage in destructive chewing for any number of reasons. In order to deal with the behavior, you must first determine why your dog is chewing—and remember, he's not doing it to spite you.

Play, Boredom, or Social Isolation

Normal play behavior sometimes leads to destruction, as it may involve digging, chewing, shredding, or shaking objects. Because dogs investigate objects by pawing at them and exploring them with their mouths, they may also inadvertently damage items in their environment. Your dog may be chewing for entertainment if:

- He's left alone for long periods without opportunities to interact with you.
- His environment is relatively barren, lacking playmates or toys.
- He's a puppy or adolescent (under three years old) and he doesn't have other outlets for his energy.
- He's a particularly active type of dog (like the herding or sporting breeds) who needs to be occupied to be happy.

Solutions

- Play with your dog daily in a safe, fenced-in area. Playing fetch is a great way to use up your dog's excess energy without wearing you out!
- Go for a walk. Walks should be more than just "bathroom time." On-leash walks are important opportunities for you and your dog to be together. Allow time for sniffing, exploring, instruction, and praise.
- Increase your dog's opportunities for mental stimulation. Teach your dog a few commands or tricks and practice them daily. Take a dog training class; not only are they fun, but such classes teach commands important for your dog's safety and give you and your dog time to work toward a common goal.
- Provide your dog with lots of appropriate toys.
- Rotate your dog's toys to refresh his interest in them. "New" toys are always more interesting than old ones.

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- Try different kinds of toys, but when you introduce a new toy, keep an eye on your dog to make sure he won't tear it up and ingest the pieces.
- Consider the various types of toys that can be stuffed with food. Putting tidbits of food inside chew toys helps your dog focus on these toys rather than on unacceptable objects.
- Make your dog's favorite off-limits chew objects unattractive to him by covering them with heavy plastic, aluminum foil, hot pepper sauce, or a commercial "anti-chew" product.
- Consider a good "doggie day care" program for two or three days a week to help your dog work off some of his excess energy.

Separation Anxiety

Dogs with separation anxiety tend to display behaviors that reflect a strong attachment to their owners. This includes following you from room to room, frantic greetings, and anxious responses whenever you prepare to leave the house. Factors that can precipitate a separation anxiety problem include:

- A change in the family's schedule that leaves your dog alone more often.
- A move to a new home.
- The death or loss of a family member or another family pet.
- A period at a shelter or boarding kennel.

Again, remember that these behaviors are not motivated by spite or revenge, but by anxiety. Punishment will only make the problem worse. Separation anxiety can be resolved by using counterconditioning and desensitization techniques.

Attention-Seeking Behavior

Without realizing it, we often pay more attention to our dogs when they're misbehaving. Dogs who don't receive a lot of attention and reinforcement for appropriate behavior may engage in destructive behavior when their owners are present as a way to attract attention—even if the attention is "negative," such as a verbal scolding.

Solutions

- Make sure your dog gets a lot of positive attention every day—playtime, walks, grooming, or just petting.
- Ignore bad behavior (as much as possible) and reward good behavior. Remember to reward your dog with praise and petting when he's playing quietly with appropriate toys.
- Make his favorite off-limits chew objects unattractive or unavailable to him. Use aversives on objects that cannot be put away.
- Teach your dog a "drop it" command, so that when he does pick up an off-limits object, you can use the command and praise him for complying. The best way to teach "drop it" is to practice exchanging a toy in his possession for a tidbit of food.
- Practice the concept of "Nothing in Life Is Free" with your dog. This gets your dog in the habit of complying with your commands and is a good way to make sure he gets lots of positive attention for doing the right things.

Fears and Phobias

Your dog's destructive behavior may be a response to something he fears. Some dogs are afraid of loud noises. Your dog's destructive behavior may be caused by fear if he tends to be more destructive when he's exposed to loud noises, such as thunderstorms, firecrackers, or construction sounds, and if the primary damage is to doors, doorframes, window coverings, screens, or walls.

Solutions

- Provide a "safe place" for your dog. Find out where he likes to go when he feels anxious, then allow access to that space or create a similar one for him to use when the fear stimulus is present.
- Don't comfort your dog when he's behaving fearfully. Try to get him to play with you or respond to commands he knows and give him praise and treats when he responds to you rather than the fear stimulus.
- Don't crate your dog unless he's thoroughly crate trained and considers the crate his safe place. If you put him in a crate to prevent destruction and he's not crate trained, he may injure himself or destroy the crate.

What NOT to Do

Punishment is rarely effective in resolving destructive behavior problems and may even make the problem worse. Never discipline your dog after the fact. If you discover your dog has chewed an item but don't catch him in the act, it's too late to administer a correction. Your dog doesn't think, "I chewed those shoes an hour ago and that's why I'm being scolded now." People often believe their dog makes this connection because he runs and hides or "looks guilty." But dogs display submissive postures like cowering, running away, or hiding when they feel threatened by an angry tone of voice, body posture, or facial expression. Your dog doesn't know what he's done wrong; he only knows that you're upset. Punishment after the fact will not only fail to eliminate the undesirable behavior, but may also provoke other undesirable behaviors.

Adapted from material originally developed by applied animal behaviorists at the Dumb Friends League, Denver, Colorado.
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- Dog Toys and How to Use Them
- Helping Your Dog Overcome Fear of Thunder and Other Startling Noises
- "Nothing in Life Is Free": A Training Technique for Dogs
- Reducing Separation Anxiety in Dogs
- Using Aversives to Modify Your Dog's Behavior

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