



Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals

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Destructive Chewing

Exploring the world with their mouths is normal behavior for dogs. Chewing can, however, be directed onto appropriate items so your dog isn't destroying items you value. Until he's learned what he can and can't chew, it's your responsibility to manage the solution 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 television remotes out of your dog's reach.
- Don't confuse your dog by offering him shoes and socks as toys and then expect him to distinguish between his shoe and yours. Your dog's toys should be obviously different from the household goods.
- Until he learns the house rules, confine him when you're unable to keep an eye on him. Choose a "safe place" that is dog-proof with fresh water and "safe" toys (see our handout: "Dog Toys and How To Use Them"). If your dog is crate trained, you may also crate him for short periods of time (see our handout: "Crate Training Your Dog").
- Give your dog plenty of people-time. Your dog won't know how to behave if you don't teach him to alternatives to inappropriate behavior and he can't learn these when he's in the yard by himself.
- If, and only if, you catch your dog chewing on something he shouldn't, interrupt the behavior by calling him away with a happy, enthusiastic tone of voice and some light hand clapping. When he stops chewing on the forbidden object, offer him an acceptable chew toy instead, and praise him lavishly when he takes the toy in his mouth.
- Have realistic expectations. It's virtually inevitable that your dog will, at some point, 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 teething and investigative puppy behavior (see our handout: "Dealing with Normal Puppy Behavior: Chewing"), however dogs will engage in destructive behavior for a variety of reasons. In order to deal with the behavior, you must first determine why your dog is being destructive.

Play, Boredom and/or Social Isolation

Normal play behavior can result in destruction, as it may involve digging, chewing, shredding and/or shaking toy-like objects. Since dogs investigate objects by pawing at them and exploring them with their mouths, they may also inadvertently damage items in their environment when they're exploring or investigating. Your dog may be chewing for entertainment if:

- He's left alone for long periods without opportunities for interaction with you.
- His environment is relatively barren, without 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 breed) who needs an active lifestyle to be happy.

Solutions:

- Play with your dog daily in a safe, fenced-in area. If you don't have a yard, a tennis court can be a good place to play. Fetch is a great game that will use up your dog's excess energy without wearing you out.
- Increase your dog's opportunities for mental stimulation. Teach your dog a few commands and/or tricks and practice them daily. If you have time, take an obedience class.
- Provide your dog with lots of toys.
- Rotate your dog's toys to refresh his interest in them. "New" toys are always more interesting than old ones.
- Try different kinds of toys, but when you introduce a new toy, watch your dog to make sure he doesn'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 hollow chew toys focuses your dog's chewing activities on these toys instead of on unacceptable objects.
- Make your dog's favorite "off-limit" chew objects unattractive to him by covering them with heavy plastic, aluminum foil, or a bad tasting chew deterrent like Bitter Apple spray (remember that you may have to douse the object and reapply frequently).
- You might want to consider a good "Doggie Day Care" program for two or three days a week to work off some of your dog's 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 greeting and reacting anxiously to your preparation to leave the house.

Factors that can precipitate a separation anxiety problem:

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

These behaviors are not motivated by spite or revenge, but anxiety. Punishment will only make the problem worse. Separation anxiety can be resolved by using counter conditioning and desensitization techniques (see our handout: "Separation Anxiety").

Attention-Seeking Behavior

Without realizing it, we often pay more attention to our dogs when they are 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 verbal scolding.

Solutions:

- Make sure your dog gets a lot of positive attention every day - playing, walking, grooming, or just petting.
- Ignore (as much as possible) bad behavior and reward good behavior. Remember to reward your dog with praise and petting when he's playing quietly with appropriate toys.
- Teach your dog a "drop it" command so when he does pick up an "off-limits" object, you can use your command and praise him for complying. The best way to teach "drop it" is to practice having him exchange a toy in his possession for a tidbit of food. Once you have the object in your possession, remember to keep the object out of your dog's reach so he doesn't get a hold of it again.
- Practice "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 - so he won't have to resort to being naughty just to get your attention.

Fears and Phobias

Your dog's destructive behavior may be a response to something he fears. Some dogs are afraid of loud noises (see our handout: "Helping Your Dog Overcome the Fear of Thunder and Other Startling Noises"). Your dog's destructive behavior may be caused by fear if the destruction occurs 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. Observe where he like to go then 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 well and give him praise and treats when he responds to you instead of 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 and/or destroy the crate.

What Not To Do

Never discipline or punish your puppy for chewing inappropriate items. If you discover a chewed item even minutes after he's chewed it, you're too late to administer a correction. Animals associated punishment with what they are doing at the time they are being punished. A puppy can't reason that, "I tore up those shoes an hour ago and that's why I'm being scolded now." Some people believe this is what a puppy is thinking because he runs and hides or because he "looks guilty." "Guilty looks" are canine submissive postures that dogs show when they are threatened. When you're angry or upset, the puppy feels threatened by your tone of voice, body postures and/or facial expressions, so he may hide or show submissive postures. Punishment alone, even when well-timed, is not recommended because it could also provoke other undesirable behaviors, such as fearfulness or aggression.