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www.YourDogsFriend.info
administrator@yourdogsfriend.info
301-983-5913

Digging, chewing and
clawing are all normal
behaviors for most
pets.

The Destructive Dog

Written by Drs. Suzanne Hetts and Daniel Q. Estep, Animal Behavior Associates, Inc., and Ms. Lori Holmberg, M.A.

Part of dealing with destructive behavior from your dog is having realistic expectations. Dogs chew, paw, jump, shred, shake and dig. These are normal and necessary behaviors for dogs, and how they explore and investigate their environment. You can expect your dog to chew up, tear up, track mud on, leave claw marks on, or in some other way destroy or damage something of monetary or sentimental value to you. Furthermore, you can expect this to happen more than once!

Your dog may dig up flower beds, tear up the carpet, scratch the walls, doors and window frames, or hard wood floors. Having your dog counter surf, raid trash cans and chew up dining room table legs are all part of sharing your life with a dog. However, the love, companionship, laughter and fun your dog brings to your family will far outweigh the distress over the loss of a few (even valuable!) possessions.

If your dog is continually and consistently damaging household items or structures, something is wrong. This article will help you understand what you can expect from your dog, and when to be concerned.

What Causes Dogs To Be Destructive?

Because destructiveness includes several different behaviors—chewing, pawing, digging, shaking and carrying—there are even more possible causes for the problem. The most common reasons for behaviors that result in destructiveness are:

- Your dog is playing, investigating his world, or looking for something to do
- Your dog is attempting to get to something and causes damage while doing so
- Your dog is panicked or frightened and trying to escape from what is frightening him.

Noises such as thunderstorms, fireworks, or construction equipment can make your dog afraid. Fear of being left alone—separation anxiety—is quite common in dogs, and can result in severe destructive behavior. Dogs with separation anxiety also often injure themselves.

Occasionally, medical problems such as gastrointestinal irritation, dental or gum pain may cause excessive chewing. Teething, while not really a medical problem, can create sore gums and puppies may chew to relieve the discomfort.

What Can Be Done About Destructive Behavior?

See your veterinarian to rule out possible medical problems. Puppy teething pain can be relieved by giving your puppy an ice cube, a cold carrot or a wet tug rope from the freezer to chew.

Before choosing a course of action, you must decide why your dog is being destructive. This is not always as easy as it sounds. Begin by looking for patterns to the behavior.

Does this destructiveness only happen when your dog is left alone? Only on Tuesday mornings? Inconsistently? You may even need to videotape your dog to acquire the information you need.

Ask your pet professional for more information about dog behavior or visit www.HelpingFido.com

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Do not crate your dog
as the only way to stop
destructive behavior.

It's become fashionable to assume that all home-alone destructiveness is due to either separation anxiety or "boredom." This is far from the truth. Two examples that prove the point are a dog that clawed the drapes when alone the morning the garbage trucks were in the neighborhood. Another scratched the siding of the house near the back door whenever the air conditioner's compressor on the patio turned on. In both cases, the dogs were frightened or upset by these noises and were either trying to get to them, or get away from them.

What if my dog is bored?

Chewing provides entertainment and relaxation, so give your dog something fun to do while you are gone. These motivations represent normal behavior for dogs.

A variety of toys that can be stuffed with food are commercially available. Put your dog's regular meals in one or more of these toys, and let her expend energy working to get the food out, rather than just letting her gulp it down in 10 seconds or less!

Regular walks and games of fetch provide an outlet for excess energy. Daily scheduled social interactions with you, other people and dogs will give your dog some consistency and a break from being alone. If your dog gets along well with other dogs, consider a well managed doggie day care one or more days each week.

Managing and preventing normal destructive behavior

Many destructive behaviors can be managed by making items you want to protect such as clothes, shoes, remote controls, books, plants and trash inaccessible and out of reach.

Put latches or hooks on cupboard doors, close bedroom and bathroom doors. Rig counter tops, trash cans, furniture with safe booby traps such as upside down office chair mats and/or double-sided sticky tape.

Use a bitter tasting spray deterrent on forbidden chew items. You can find both outdoor and indoor deterrents at pet stores and at websites.

If your dog digs, make a sandbox and hide tasty treats in it to reward digging in a designated place versus the flower garden. Fill previously dug holes and place heavy wire over them until your dog loses interest.

To control damage done as a result your dog attempting to get to something on the other side of a barrier (a fence, window or door) try closing window coverings and play soft music or leave the TV on to muffle outdoor noises. If you normally leave your dog outside, try leaving him inside to alleviate barrier frustrations that result in digging at fences.

What if I think my dog has separation anxiety or is afraid for some other reason?

Fearful dogs can be quite destructive, sometimes even injuring themselves in the process. Dogs with separation anxiety often direct their destructive behavior at doors and windows, as though they are trying to follow their owners. Occasionally these frightened dogs will also destroy clothing or furniture containing the scent of their owners.

DO NOT crate your dog if you believe he may have separation anxiety or is noise phobic. If your dog is panicked when left alone, confinement will only increase his terror. Your dog is likely to harm himself trying to escape the crate and the problem will only worsen.

Guilty looks are
actually submissive
behaviors.

You will need the help of a certified applied or veterinary behaviorist to solve this problem. Talk to your pet professional about help or a referral. You can find out more about trainers and behavior consultants in the Pamphlet for Pet Parents of the same name.

You may also want to work with your veterinarian for an appropriate short-term medication for your dog. You can learn more about these problems from the Pamphlets for Pet Parents by the same names.

How can destructive behaviors be prevented?

Bad habits are harder to break than good habits are to make. If your dog is new to your home, good supervision and “dog-proofing” your house will help prevent your dog from getting into things she shouldn’t.

For a while, confinement in a dog-proofed area when you can’t be home to watch your dog may be an option. However, you must be sure your dog’s destructiveness is not due to separation anxiety or other fear related behavior. If it is, crating will likely increase your dog’s fear and make matters worse.

In addition to preventing unwanted behavior, reward your dog with tidbits and attention when she is chewing or playing with her own toys. Provide appropriate toys and rotate them so they remain novel rather than leaving a lot of toys out all of the time. Provide ample amounts of regularly scheduled social time (with you, other people and dogs), exercise and play such as walks or fetch.

Enroll your dog in training classes or a sport class such as agility. Training provides mental and physical exercise for your dog.

What Not To Do

Your dog is not being destructive because she is trying to “get even” or get revenge on you for some real or perceived slight. Nor is your dog being rebellious, “acting out” or attempting to “be the boss.”

Do not punish your dog for his destructiveness unless you literally catch him in the act. Never punish your dog after the fact. Dogs cannot associate destructive acts with punishment that occurs minutes or hours after the fact. Punishment only works when it is immediate. Simply clean up destroyed and damaged items and make sure you are managing the environment to eliminate the opportunities to be destructive.

Your dog will however, associate the punishment with whatever he was doing at the time of the punishment, such as running to the door to greet you. Inappropriate punishment causes anxiety because it is unpredictable and not connected to your dog’s behavior.

If your dog looks ‘guilty’ or acts ‘remorseful’ (cowering, hiding), he is only reacting to your behavior—your body language, facial expressions, actions and/or tone of voice. Your behaviors are threatening, so your dog shows submissive behaviors—misinterpreted as “guilt” - which is his way of trying to “turn off” your displeasure.

Drs. Suzanne Hetts and Dan Estep are Certified Applied Animal Behaviorists and international award-winning speakers and authors living in Denver, Colorado. For over 25 years they have been helping pet parents understand their pet’s behavior and solve behavior problems.

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