

Ending Destructive Chewing

by
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Dogs love to chew. Puppies chew to investigate their environment and to relieve the discomfort of teething. Adult dogs chew because it feels good, it helps pass the time when there's nothing else to do, and sometimes because a tooth hurts or some nutrient is missing from the diet. Left to their own devices, dogs will often chew on the first object they come across, or an object that smells like the owner. Sometimes a food smell attracts them. Whatever the reason, chewing problems are easier to prevent than correct, and are best corrected using positive methods.

Punishment

Punishing a dog for inappropriate chewing is seldom successful in correcting the problem. To be effective as a training tool, punishment must be 100% consistent. If a dog is punished for chewing in the owner's presence, he simply learns to chew when the owner is absent. Punishment more than 3 seconds after the crime is not effective; the dog has already forgotten the crime. If you come home to a scene of destruction, very calmly tell your dog to go get a chew toy and praise him for bringing one to you. If you are really angry and must let off steam, go in another room, away from the dog, and beat up a pillow. Beating a dog simply teaches him to fear the person beating him, and possibly people in general.

Prevention

The best way to protect your furnishings and possessions is to start when your puppy is very young, confining it when you cannot supervise play, providing sufficient exercise and proper nutrition, offering appropriate chew toys, and praising the pup lavishly for using them. Crating your pup can be a life-saver, preventing it from chewing electrical cords or ingesting poisons when left unsupervised. Make sure the crate is large enough to allow the pup to stretch out. Provide a comfy bed, and a couple of really good chew toys.

When you are with the pup but unable to supervise closely, confine it with a leash attached to your belt. Make sure the pup won't chew the leash, and provide one or two good chew toys. Try to catch the pup in the act of chewing the right thing and praise lavishly.

Exercise Body and Mind

Many chewing problems are solved simply by ensuring the dog has sufficient exercise. A 30-minute walk in the morning before the dog is left for the day will help relax and even tire the dog enough to reduce the desire to chew. Incorporating some training exercises into the walk, such as having the dog sit or down at several points on the walk, and doing a come-fore exercise 3 or 4 times will also help relax the dog. If a walk is impossible, 15 or 20 minutes of tossing a ball in the backyard or down a flight of carpeted stairs for the dog to retrieve will do the trick. The dog should also have some exercise in the evening, to help it relax for bedtime.

Training

Take the time to teach your dog to chew on chew toys. Always reinforce your dog with lots of praise when you

"catch him in the act" of chewing on his own toys. Play games such as toss and fetch with a toy to increase his interest. If the problem chewing occurs when you leave the house and is focused on belongings that smell like you, try to leave your scent on his own toys. Carry a new chew toy around in your pocket for a day and handle it, or just rub your hands over one of his toys. Once he has the hang of chewing on his toys, teach him to "Go get a chew toy," praising him when he brings one to you.

Keep chew toys in every room of the house until the dog gets good at finding them on command or on his own. Eventually, you can keep them in a centrally located toy basket, making sure that the dog has unlimited access to them. Periodically you will have to fish them out from under chairs and sofas and return them to the basket.

Once this training is under way, you can lead the dog to a forbidden object, such as drapes or shoes or electrical cords. Move the object around, and just as he is about to sniff or lick or chew the object, say "OFF!" in a firm voice, and then, "Go get your chew toy." Repeat this several times, and then if you catch him investigating a forbidden object on his own, repeat the "OFF" and "Go get your chew toy." command. This is what trainers call an instructive reprimand, letting him know by tone of voice and words what is wrong and how he can correct the problem.

Appropriate Chew Toys

Provide your dog with a variety of chew toys, including a Kong toy, nylon bones, sterilized marrow bones, and a soft "Chew Man" type or twisted rope toy. Different dogs prefer different textures, and one dog may prefer several different toys depending on its mood. Avoid home-made toys like worn-out tennis shoes or knotted socks. It takes extra time to teach the dog the difference between the old shoes and your brand-new \$100 running shoes, and certain fibers, like the nylon in socks or hose can be very dangerous to a dog when ingested. It is cheaper to spend money on good dog toys than to replace your good clothes. Hollow toys, such as the Kong or marrow bones can be stuffed with peanut butter or cheese to increase desirability. After some trial and error, you will discover what your dog likes best. It's a good idea to stock up on favorite toys, so that new ones are always available.

Nutrition and Health

If your older dog suddenly develops a chewing problem, have your vet do a thorough exam to rule out illness, such as an abscessed tooth. With all dogs, be sure that the diet is adequate to meet that dog's nutritional needs. A dog with a fixation on chewing a particular substance (such as wood or paper) may have a pica, a craving for something missing from the diet. Look for a food with as little filler as possible, and avoid foods with additives and byproducts.

Many dogs develop destructive chewing habits when their feeding schedule changes, specifically when meals are decreased from twice a day to once a day. All dogs should be fed at least twice a day (growing puppies three times a day) to prevent such chewing problems, as well as other potentially serious health problems.



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