



DESTRUCTIVE CHEWING, its causes and cures.

All puppies chew. Chewing serves a number of purposes for dogs, it is their nature to do so. They do not have hands to explore their world with, they have and use their teeth. Puppies will chew almost anything, even items that can make them sick or worse. When “teething,” dogs chew on items for much the same reason that a human baby does. This chewing may even help to “set” or “bed” the teeth in the dog’s jaw. However, exploring and teething are not the only reasons that dogs chew. They also chew to relieve stress and/or when playing. You cannot control what the dog FEELS or WHY it chews, but at the end of this article, there is further discussion about the how and whys of chewing. What you can control, both for your dog safety and your sanity, is what the pup chews and when. Like housebreaking, destructive chewing requires a big initial commitment on the part of an owner. As the dog learns what is and is not acceptable, however, your life as an owner will become much less stressful.

Controlling unwanted chewing is not difficult. Here are the basics:

* Accept the Inevitable

Your puppy will chew. He isn't a bad puppy. He isn't defiant. He's just a pup. Some pups, like Retrievers, chew a great deal for a long time. Many such dogs can't be left unsupervised until they are two or more years old. Don't rush things.

Behavior is much easier to prevent than to change.

* Supply Good Toys

Good toys mean safe, long-lasting dog toys *not used human items*. Dog toys teach your dog to focus its chewing urges on rubber, nylon or non-splintering bones. Used human items encourage it to seek out fabric or things that smell strongly of you. Old house shoes, socks, gloves, towels, etc., are inappropriate “toys” for your dog.

* Supervise

If you can't see your dog, you can't help it make the right choices. Your dog MUST be SUPERVISED all the time or confined (while training it).

If you see your dog starting on a table leg, tell him sharply "Leave it!" or "Anghhh!" then redirect it to a toy and praise it for playing with the dog toy. You must show your dog the ALTERNATIVES. The "Leave it!" or "Anghhh!" as a correction for the inappropriate chewing behavior, followed by a happy “Good dog!” and maybe a minute or two of play or affection for appropriate chewing behavior (on the dog toy.)

* Deter

There are plenty of anti-chew products (like “Bitter Apple” or unscented spray deodorant) that a pet owner can apply to items that you do not want your dog to chew. That way, if you miss the “moment,” and, for example, your pup decides to chew an electrical cord, the taste will deter it from chewing, it will not be hurt and your dog will get yet another lesson in what should not be chewed.

Such simple measures will get you through puppyhood with minimal damage.

WHY DID MY DOG START CHEWING?

"My dog, now 8 months old, has always been a good puppy up until last month when he started chewing everything in sight. He ate my shoes, belts and couch. He thinks it is okay to chew on anything he wants. How do I train him to chew on his dog toys and nothing else? He has bones and chew toys, but he isn't interested in chewing them."

ANSWER:

Since your dog did not chew up until last month, you should ask yourself what happened last month? Did someone move out or in? Did a work schedule change? Is he chewing when you are home? Does he make sure you see him chewing or "sneak" off to chew?

Stress, even that caused by small changes, can upset your dog. It might be bored because it is getting less attention that it is used to. Unless your dog has a “serious” problem, and you suspect it might have “separation anxiety” (dog exhibits destructive behavior in your absence), here are some steps to help correct your dog's

inappropriate chewing behavior:

- Keep your dog either in sight, on lead or confined in a crate all times.
- Put away items that it likes to chew that you don't want it to chew.
- Keep doors closed to rooms you do not want your dog in.
- Teach your dog the "give" command. (Teach your dog to give you an item that it is chewing by offering it a treat and saying "give" to the dog. The dog will have to drop the item it is chewing in order to take the treat. When it does, reward the dog by saying "good dog" and giving it the treat.) Should your attempt at trading an item with your dog cause a confrontation, stop immediately and consult with a reputable animal behaviorist as soon as possible.
- Teach your dog to work for a living -- Teach your dog basic obedience commands and make it do something in order to earn attention, food, treats, walks, and playtime with you. This will help establish you as leader and prompt your dog to pay attention to you and care more about your reactions to its behavior. Attend a good positive based training class to learn basic commands and some tricks, your dog will benefit from the emotional, mental and physical stimulation.
- Give your dog more exercise. This one cannot be stressed enough. Most dogs, whether kept in the house or yard, do not get anywhere near enough exercise. If you are the "couch potato" type, teach your dog to "fetch" items that you throw. Be sure to reward your dog for bringing items back to you. Some dogs will fetch just for the fun of doing so, other dogs need a bit more motivation to do so.
- Stay calm when you see your dog chewing. If necessary, keep your dog on a leash attached to a flat, non-tightening collar when you are home so you can easily get a hold of it to calmly remove items from your dog's mouth when necessary. If it chews a normal flat leash, go to the hardware store and have a 4 to 6 foot leash made of coated steel cable. Should your attempt at taking an item from your dog cause a confrontation, stop immediately and consult with a reputable animal behaviorist as soon as possible.
- Whenever possible, apply an anti-chew product to all items that your dog likes to chew on and that you do not want it to chew on. (Test fabrics to make sure the product will not cause staining or damage.)
- Invest in a sterilized bone or small Kong toy that can be stuffed with dog biscuits and cheese or peanut butter. Kongs are excellent chew toys. For creative ways to use them, see <http://www.kongcompany.com/how2use.html>
- Rotate your dog's toys to help it stay interested in them. Trainers often "trick" their dogs into caring more about toys by playing with the toy themselves in front of the dog and then putting the toy up. When the dog finally gets the toy, it is more excited than it would be if they gave the toy to the dog immediately.
- If your dog is on puppy food, consider changing it over to a quality adult food. Some foods provide a dog with more energy than it needs. That extra energy can translate into chewing, or other undesirable behaviors. With adult dogs, switching to an "adult lite" food may help. Dog food companies sell dog food and want you to use as much as possible, maybe more than your dog needs; however, before you try this option, be sure to consult with your dog's vet. The object is to not overfeed, but you don't want to under-feed either. If you are "free feeding" your dog, be sure you give it the appropriate amount. Some people who "free feed" will give their dog more food than it needs and fill their dog's bowl up whenever it gets low.
- One "trainer trick" is, for dogs that are more determined chewers, to teach a dog to "offer" items to you before it chews on them. Anytime it picks up an item, have it bring the item to you, "give" it to you, and then you reward the dog. If it is a dog toy, reward the dog and give the toy back to it. If the item is something you do not want the dog to chew on, take it, reward the dog, but do not give the item back. Substitute a dog toy for the item OR run the dog through a number of commands and reward it for responding to the commands. In other words, PAY YOUR DOG for letting you decide if he can have an item back to chew on it or not. Remember, he must get "paid" one way or the other! You cannot just have him bring items to you, take them, and not reward him, because if you do, he will quit offering them to you.