



PREVENTING DESTRUCTIVE BEHAVIOR IN THE HOME

Why do dogs chew, dig and tear stuff up?

When left alone—either for only a few minutes or for longer periods of time while their humans are away—many dogs dig, chew or destroy household items, like furniture, stray shoes, papers and books, remote controls, the contents of trash cans, and any number of other “illegal” things they can get their paws on. Is it because they get cranky and seek revenge when we leave them at home alone? Is it because they’re challenging our authority? Or is it simply because they’ve all developed a taste for carpeting, upholstery, paper products and newly-planted garden flowers?

Although there are multiple reasons that dogs become destructive in the home, most are actually pretty simple and understandable:

- **Dogs of all ages (yes, adult dogs too) need to chew on things regularly**, both to exercise their jaws and satisfy their deeply rooted instincts to chew and rip things apart. It’s just a normal part of being a dog. So it makes sense that dogs actively seek things to chew. If you don’t provide appropriate and appealing options, your dog will find things to chew on his own. Most dogs gnaw on our stuff simply because we haven’t given them “legal” alternatives.
- **Many pet dogs are underexercised and/or bored.** If you’re a dog, life in a human world can be hard! Many pet dogs spend a lot of time by themselves, waiting around for opportunities to interact with their people. That probably gets pretty dull. Virtually all dogs need jobs—ways to occupy themselves and outlets for their natural canine urges, like chasing, sniffing, tugging, digging and chewing. If you provide adequate mental and physical stimulation for your dog, it’s much less likely that he’ll come up with his own “jobs,” like digging up flower beds, dissecting your couch and sampling your new heels.
- **Dogs often chew and destroy things when left alone because they’re anxious and lonely.** Dogs are social animals, and they sometimes have trouble adapting to long periods of isolation. When your dog’s home alone, he’s probably a little stressed out. In response to stress, many dogs resort to performing soothing, repetitive canine behaviors to relieve their anxiety. Some chew things up, some tear things apart, and some dig in dirt or on carpeting. We perform stress-relieving behaviors when we’re anxious too. They’re just a little different. Instead of gnawing on table legs, we engage in things like nail biting, pacing and fidgeting.

So how do I prevent or stop my dog from “redecorating” my home?

The main thing to remember is that, although it can sometimes seem like dogs engage in naughty, destructive behaviors out of stubbornness or sheer defiance of our human wishes, it’s actually not that complicated. Dogs usually take up illegal doggie hobbies simply because they haven’t been taught to do otherwise. It’s not that your dog is getting back at you for something you did or planning a coup to overthrow the human power structure. It’s just that he needs to satisfy his natural urges, and he hasn’t yet figured out how to do that in ways that are acceptable to you. How can you help him get with the program? Prevent and provide.

Prevent Mistakes

Set your dog up to succeed by making it literally impossible for him to make “wrong” choices. Always supervise your dog when you’re home together. Keep off-limits items out of reach and your eyeballs on him at all times. If he puts something in his mouth that he shouldn’t, just redirect his attention to one of his own toys instead. If you can’t directly supervise your dog, when you’re at home or while you’re away, put him in a crate or a dog-proofed room, free of things he might destroy. (See our handout, *Crate Training Your Dog*, for detailed information about introducing your dog to a crate.)

Provide Legal Alternatives

Now you know how to prevent your dog from making mistakes and chewing on or destroying things in your home. In addition to doing that, you also need help your dog focus on playing with his *own* stuff, rather than yours. (Remember, he still needs outlets for his instinctual behaviors.)

Here are some great things to try:

- Provide plenty of inedible chew items, like Nylabones and hard rubber toys.
- Also provide edible chews, like rawhide, marrow bones, bully sticks and pig ears. (You’ll want to stick around when you give your dog these, just to be sure that your dog doesn’t swallow too big a piece of a chew and choke. If you’re unsure about whether or not—or how often—you should give your dog edible chew things, call your veterinarian.)

- Try buying a few food puzzle toys. Using them will give your dog's brain and jaws a great work-out! Here are some of our favorites:
 - ~ The Kong: a tough, hollow rubber toy that you can fill with kibble, treats, soft dog food, a little cream cheese or peanut butter, etc. You can also freeze these toys after packing them with food/treats, so they pose more of a challenge to your dog.
 - ~ Buster Cubes: a hard, square puzzle toy that has a "maze" inside. You pour dry kibble into the toy, and then your dog rolls it around on the floor to get the food to come out, a few pieces at a time.
 - ~ Premier's Tug-a-Jug: a hard, hollow bottle-shaped toy with a rope attached. You can put food inside for your dog to get out AND use the Tug-a-Jug as an interactive tug toy too!

To keep your dog extra-employed, you can feed him all of his meals in puzzle toys instead of a bowl. That way, he'll have to work to get his chow out of the toys, which will challenge and entertain him. When your dog becomes a puzzle-toy pro, you can even hide them around the house before you leave your dog home alone, and then he can "hunt" his breakfast or dinner while you're gone!

Increase Freedom Slowly

If you prevent your dog from engaging in destructive behavior AND, at the same time, get him hooked on his own chews and toys, the new good habits you've encouraged will replace the old ones you want to eliminate. After you've managed your dog's behavior carefully for a few months, making sure that he doesn't have *any* opportunities to make mistakes and gnaw on things he shouldn't, you can gradually increase his freedom. Supervise diligently as you allow more and more access to areas in your home that aren't 100% dog-proofed, so that you can interrupt any unwanted behavior and redirect your dog's attention toward acceptable alternatives. When you leave your dog home alone, we recommend continuing to keep him in his dog-proofed area or crate, always remembering to provide plenty of toys and chews to keep him busy.

Other Tips & Info.

- If you leave your dog alone and then return later to find that he's destroyed something, it is WAY TOO LATE to punish him. Dogs' brains don't move forward and backward in time the way ours do, so your dog won't understand if you yell at him after the fact (even a minute or two later). He may look "guilty," but that's probably because he's learned that when you look unhappy (which you undoubtedly will if you've just discovered that your dog shredded your couch while you were at work), it's Bad News for him. He *will* read your body language and realize that you're about to do something unpleasant to him—but he *won't* know why.
- Coating things your dog shouldn't chew with Grannick's Bitter Apple, a spray that tastes really bad but won't damage most furniture/objects, may help deter your dog. If his favorite, normally delicious armchair suddenly has a new, horrible flavor, it'll probably make a big impression. He may never go near it again....
- Rotate your dog's toys and chews to keep them interesting, and give your dog something new and exciting every once in a while. Novelty IS the spice of life, after all.
- Digging, like chewing and other destructive behaviors, relieves boredom and stress, so if your dog engages in this behavior, he may need more quality time with you and something else to do when you're not around to provide companionship and stimulation. If your dog spends time alone in the yard and digs, consider reducing his time outside. He'd probably rather be inside with you. When your dog *is* hanging out in the yard, make sure he has plenty of toys and things to chew on. You can also try building or buying him a sandbox, where he IS allowed to satisfy his urge to dig. Bury some of his toys in it to encourage him to try it out. Dogs also dig if they need a cool place to lie down, so be sure to provide shade and shelter for your dog when he's spending time outside, especially during warm weather.
- It will help to increase your dog's mental and physical exercise in general. A tired dog is a good dog! Investigate options like doggie daycare and dog sports, like agility and flyball. Take your dog on walks or to dog parks on a regular basis. Teach your dog to fetch and tug. Consider hiring a dog walker if you're gone all day. Take your dog to an obedience class that teaches fun, reward-based methods. If you wear your dog out with training, games and exercise, he'll be way more likely to sleep like a dog log whenever he's left alone—instead of staying awake to chew, dig or destroy your stuff.
- As we mentioned above, most dogs get a little anxious when left alone. However, some dogs experience *extreme* anxiety when isolated or in response to certain stimuli, like unusual noises or thunderstorms. If, in addition to destructive behavior, you notice behaviors like excessive drooling or vocalization, shaking, urinating or defecating indoors, panting and/or pacing, contact us for advice.

Resources

If you have additional questions about your dog's behavior, please call our **Behavior Helpline: (804) 643-SPCA**. We'd love to help.