

Solving Destructive Chewing Problems in Dogs

Daniel Estep, Ph.D. and Suzanne Hetts, Ph.D.

www.AnimalBehaviorAssociates.com

Copyright ABA, Inc.

It is a fact of life that dogs, and especially puppies, destroy things. Invariably, young dogs chew on the most fragile and most cherished possessions. A few years ago, our dog Mocha chewed up the last photograph we had of our grandparents. Usually this destructiveness occurs as a result of puppy teething or exploration of the environment or play. Here are some things to think about in dealing with destructive dogs.

Teach acceptable behavior. For puppies that are teething or chewing things in play or out of investigation, trade them an acceptable chew object for the inappropriate object. Hard rubber toys stuffed with tasty food treats, rawhide or other edible chew toys may be especially attractive. Experiment with your dog to find things that are most attractive to her. Don't leave out many toys at one time but only put out two or three at a time and rotate them with other toys every few days. Toys that haven't been out for a while may be more attractive than toys that are out all the time. Don't give your dog old shoes, socks, clothing or children's toys. These may be confused with the real things that you don't want destroyed. Consider giving ice cubes to teething puppies as the cold ice seems to soothe the discomfort. Anytime your dog picks up an appropriate toy on her own, be sure to praise and reward her. Owners never seem to reward their dogs enough for doing the right thing.

Minimize inappropriate behavior. Make it difficult for the dog to get to inappropriate objects. "Dog proof" areas where the puppy is kept or is active. This means putting away food, trash, clothes, shoes and other things the dog finds attractive. Have family members pick up clothes, books, papers and other things. Don't leave eyeglasses, TV remote controls or food lying around in easy reach. Close doors and use baby gates to keep dogs under supervision and away from inappropriate things. Leash dogs to your belt or near you so you can supervise them and reward appropriate behavior. If you must leave your dog unsupervised for long periods of time, leave her in a dog proofed area such as a kitchen, laundry room or bathroom, or in a crate or kennel. Be sure to gradually get your puppy used to this area for several days before you leave her, and be sure to leave her with water, a place to nap, a place to eliminate if no one can take her out, and chew toys.

Use punishment correctly. Never hit, slap, kick or shake your dog for destroying things. This may create fear, aggression or make the problem worse. Never punish your dog after the fact. If you don't catch her in the act, simply clean up the mess and try to avoid the problem next time. If you do catch her in the act, squirt her with water from a squirt bottle, or make a loud noise with a can full of pennies, a whistle or air horn. You must catch her in the act and catch her every time to make the punishment work. Consider using booby traps to punish destructiveness. Put double-sided tape or upside down rug runner next to trash cans or stack empty pop cans on top of counters to startle the dog.

Be consistent, be patient and you can usually teach your dog what she should be chewing on. If these things don't work or you suspect other causes for the

destructiveness such as separation anxiety or fears, contact your veterinarian or an animal behavior specialist.

**Edited version first published in the Rocky Mountain News, Denver, CO.
Any use of this article must cite the authors and the Rocky Mountain News**