



Potter's Angels Rescue

DESTRUCTIVE BEHAVIOR IN DOGS

Chewing, playing, exploring, and investigating their environment are normal behaviors for dogs especially puppies! However, these normal behaviors can result in destruction of household property, which can become a serious and frustrating problem for owners. In fact, destructive behavior is one of the most commonly reported behavior problems in dogs. **DOGS DO NOT PARTICIPATE IN DESTRUCTIVE ACTIVITIES OUT OF SPITE OR REVENGE.** Dogs often behave destructively to relieve anxiety or as an outlet for excess energy. While people may exercise, chew on their nails or have a drink to relieve tension, dogs tend to chew, dig, lick excessively, pace or house soil when anxious. Because destructive behavior has many potential causes, a careful analysis of the dog's history and environment is necessary to help identify the cause of the problem so that effective behavior modification techniques can be recommended.

COMMON CAUSES OF DESTRUCTIVE BEHAVIOR

- **TEETHING:** When teething, puppies' gums may be painful. Chewing appears to help relieve the discomfort of teething. The behavior usually ceases after permanent teeth appear.
- **SEPARATION ANXIETY:** This is one of the most common causes of destructive behavior in dogs. Dogs with separation anxiety tend to display behaviors which reflect a strong attachment to their owners – following owners from room to room, displaying almost frantic greeting behaviors, and reacting to owners' preparation to leave the house. Factors which can precipitate a separation anxiety problem include a change in the family's schedule which results in the dog being left alone more often, a move to a new house, the death or loss of another family pet, or a period at a boarding kennel. Separation anxiety may be manifested by excessive vocalizations or house soiling, along with destructive behavior. these behaviors are not motivated by spite or revenge, but by anxiety, and punishment will make the problem worse! Separation anxiety can be resolved using counter conditioning and desensitization techniques under the supervision of a professional animal behaviorist. For more information on separation anxiety and its treatments contact us for our informative article on this common behavior.
- **FEARS AND PHOBIAS:** Fearful responses to thunderstorms and loud noises often involve escape attempts which result in destructive behavior. In these cases, doors, doorframes, window trim and screens and walls are often damaged. These problems can be especially dangerous, because excessively fearful dogs may injure themselves attempting to break through windows or doors to escape a feared situation.

- **SOCIAL ISOLATION OR BOREDOM:** If dogs do not receive adequate opportunities for social interaction with their owners or if their environment is relatively barren, without playmates or toys, they may entertain themselves by engaging in activities which inadvertently result in destruction of property.
- **ATTENTION-GETTING BEHAVIOR:** Without realizing it, owners may pay the most attention to their dogs when they are misbehaving. Dogs which do not receive attention and reinforcement for appropriate behavior, may show destructive behavior when owners are present, as a way to attract attention – even if the attention is “negative” such as verbal scoldings.
- **PLAY BEHAVIOR:** Normal play behavior can often result in destructive behavior, and often involves digging or chewing, shredding, and shaking of toy-like objects such as shoes, socks or paper objects. This is very common in young dogs and often occurs when the dog is unsupervised or does not have sufficient outlets for appropriate play behavior.
- **INVESTIGATIVE BEHAVIOR:** Dogs may inadvertently damage items in their environment when they are exploring or investigating. Dogs investigate objects by pawing at them and exploring them with their mouths. Many dogs, especially retrievers and young animals, also like to fetch and carry objects. Novel or unfamiliar objects are often damaged in this manner, especially when dogs are left unsupervised for long time periods.
- **INAPPROPRIATE PUNISHMENT:** Excessive punishment or punishment after the fact for any misbehavior may elicit anxiety associated with the presence of the owner. Thus, anticipation of the owner’s return or arrival increases the dog’s anxiety level, and may result in destructive behavior to relieve the anxiety.
- **MEDICAL PROBLEMS:** Upper gastrointestinal irritation, dental or gum pain may cause destructive chewing in adult dogs. Some diseases may cause excessive hunger (polyphagia), or eating of non-food items (pica). Consult your veterinarian if you suspect these problems.
- **INCONSISTENT FEEDING ROUTINES:** A hungry dog may go on a foraging spree, and destroy the house searching for food.
- **BARRIER FRUSTRATIONS:** Some dogs become anxious, and therefore destructive, when confined in small areas such as crates (flight kennels) or small rooms (bathroom, laundry room). This may be associated with separation anxiety.
- **PREDATORY BEHAVIOR:** If dogs are attempting to pursue rodents underneath floorboards or behind walls, destructive behavior may result.

As you can see from this discussion, destructive behavior has many potential causes, and the cause of the behavior must be determined if the problem is to be dealt with effectively. Because destructive behavior is so common, it is reasonable to conclude that all dog owners should be prepared to lose something of value due to their dog’s destructive behavior! This is part of the experience of owning a dog! Certainly persistent and severe destructive behavior problems need to be resolved, for both the dogs as well as the owner’s sake, but occasional destructive behavior should be put in perspective.

Punishment alone rarely is effective in resolving destructive behavior problems and can make them worse. Punishment after the fact is **NEVER** appropriate. When punishment is indicated, the goal is NOT to punish the animal, but the behavior. This can never be accomplished with punishment after the fact. For assistance in resolving destructive and other behavior problems, you should contact a professional animal behaviorist, but here are some basic tips for dealing with a destructive dog.

Tips for Dealing with a Destructive Dog

- **Walk your dog regularly:** If you have slipped in maintaining a walking routine with your dog, reinstate it. If you haven't yet developed a routine, start now. And if you're not free to walk your dog regularly, find somebody who can. Go for regular walks and try to include a variety of exercise options during the walk. Some ideas include taking your dog on a walk in an area that is challenging. Try anywhere that has hills or an incline. Allow him to take breaks once in a while and bring along water for him to drink as needed (throw in your own water bottle, too!). Your dog may get in the habit of using the same trail, so switch it up to challenge him and keep him from getting bored.
- **Play with your dog more: Besides walking, play is an important part of your dogs interaction with you.** Play catch in the backyard for 15 minutes a day. Try doing this in the morning when you're more alert and your dog is usually very hyper. You'll notice that he'll have less energy throughout the day if you drain him of it earlier on! Make a meet-up time for doggy friends. Find out which of your friends own dogs and plan meet-ups in central locations where your dogs can play together. Naturally, you'll also need to learn in advance if they get along with each other!
- **Avoid overcrowding your dog:** If your dog feels overcrowded, either by living in a confined space or being forced to share his space with other dogs without having space of his own, abnormal behaviors can arise. In particular, male dogs will fight over territory if they feel crowded.
- **Provide a Routine for your dog and stick to it:** Much like children and many adult humans, dogs like routine. When you change routine or provide none, it can distress a dog considerably. Things to keep in mind include:
 - Feed your dog at regular mealtimes during the day. Try to always feed in the same place.
 - Take your dog for regularly scheduled walks and bathroom times. If dogs know what to expect each day they are less likely to get anxious and overwhelmed.
 - Provide your dog with a calm and peaceful environment. Your dog is more likely to be annoying and overactive if she's already in a chaotic environment. Turn the television down lower and close any doors where sound can impact her negatively.
- **Do your best not to leave your dog in a kennel for long periods:** This creates isolation and causes her to feel less loved. In turn, she'll become more hyper trying to get your attention. If you do use a kennel, make sure to spend plenty of time with your dog exercising, playing, and giving her attention.
- **Use a short leash for walking:** The closer your dog is when he walks with you, the more he'll know that you're the one who has the authority and is in control. Never let him

walk ahead of you, but always right by your side. This lets him know you're in authority and he must submit. Keep in mind that most dogs are natural followers and providing them with this leadership and guidance is something that they crave and appreciate.

- **Change the way you greet your dog when you come home:** Decrease your dog's energy when you walk in the door. It's natural for dogs to become overly active and excited when you get home. She'll wag her tail, stick out her tongue, and often she'll try to jump on you. To calm her overactive state, ignore her when you walk in until she has calmed down. This will stop any encouragement of her hyper behavior and will let her know you don't approve. After a few weeks of practicing this behavior, you'll notice she'll be excited to see you but won't be likely to jump or behave in a destructive way anymore.
- **Entertain your dog while you're away:** The most common time of the day that your dog is likely to be destructive is when you're away at work or out doing things away from the house. Your dog can feel lonely, isolated, or unloved. When you're getting ready to go somewhere, leave a marrow bone with your dog. It'll distract him and allow him to feel occupied while you're gone. He'll be less likely to try getting attention in other ways when you've taken the time to attend to his needs before leaving. If your dog is always playing with the ten toys you bought him, then he'll get tired of them and unimpressed when you leave. Make sure you hide all of his toys in a closet and only allow two or three to be out at a time. When you switch the toys around, your dog will be entertained more and he'll think it's a treat when he gets an old toy to play with that's been hidden away. As an added incentive, this will prevent you from spending more money on new toys whenever you're planning on leaving for a long period of time! Also, be careful not to leave a dog with a toy that they can tear apart or swallow while they are unattended. We choose toys such as kongs or uncooked marrow bones, that they can't choke on or break into pieces and swallow.
- **Chew/Dig Deterrents:** If there is something specific that your dog is chewing on you can use deterrents such as Bitter Apple Spray or other store bought items for this problem. Another effective deterrent that you may have at home is chili powder. Sprinkle some of that in the area where they are chewing or digging to prevent them from revisiting the same area.