

Explaining 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, 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.

The purpose of this handout is to explain 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, particularly in those obtained from shelters or found as strays. 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 leaving the house.

Factors which can precipitate a separation anxiety problem include a change in the family's schedule which result 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 manifest 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 certified animal behaviorist.

Fears and Phobias

Fearful responses to thunderstorms and loud noises often involve escape attempts that result in destructive behavior. In these cases, doors, door frames, 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 that may inadvertently 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 to 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 alone 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 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.

DESTRUCTIVE BEHAVIOR

As you can see from this discussion, destructive behavior has many potential causes, and it should be clear why 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 dog's as well as the owner's sake, but the occasional destructive behavior should be put into 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, once medical problems have been ruled out by your veterinarian, contact a certified applied animal behaviorist.