

DOG STAR DAILY

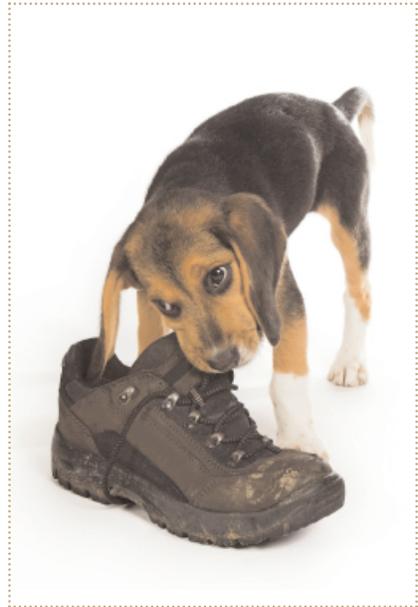
Basic Instinct

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Many years ago, I asked my malamute Phoenix, whether she wanted to drive down Solano Avenue to get some frozen yogurt and she didn't reply with her usual WrrrWrrrooooo and so, convinced she was up to some mischief, I quietly crept upstairs, only to find her puzzling with The Times crossword while listening to CNN. This may surprise some of you. It certainly surprised me. Normally I expect dogs to chew, dig and bark for amusement, not to read a book, enjoy needlepoint, or watch soaps on the television.

Normal, Natural and Necessary

Dogs chew for a variety of reasons but primarily, because that's what dogs do. Dogs chew because it's fun. In fact, the majority of canine investigatory of occupational activities involve using their jaws and paws to chew or dig. For many domestic dogs one of these activities becomes their hobby and just like young boys, puppy and adolescent dogs can become quite fanatical about their hobbies. Chewing is basically a normal and natural doggy behavior, which is also necessary for maintaining healthy gums and clean teeth.



Puppies are especially mouthy and it is often assumed they chew to soothe the irritation of teething — which is certainly true. It is also assumed, puppies will magically grow out of the habit. This is frighteningly untrue. Certainly the puppy's rapacious penchant for chewing will wane as he gets older, but the adolescent dog will still chew for amusement and if you have allowed him to chew inappropriate items as a puppy, then more likely than not, he will continue chewing inappropriate items as an adult.

The truth is, puppies will chew just about anything and everything because they are inquisitive little blighters. Mother Nature made little puppies perpetual chewing machines, so they may learn the difference between sentient living beings versus inanimate objects. When they bite too hard on mum's teats, dinner service is curtailed and when they bite too hard on another puppy's ears or tail, or little children's fingers, they lose a playmate. Thus, the pup learns to inhibit the force of their biting/mouthing behavior before weak puppy jaws develop into the formidable weapons of adolescent and adult dogs.

Boredom

We must try to see things from the dog's point of view. The dog is a social animal. We invite the pup to share our home but once puppy-novelty has worn off, we tend to ignore the pup for much of the time that we are home and leave her in solitary confinement whenever we are gone. The poor dog is simply searching for some form of occupational therapy to pass the time of day when left at home alone. The dog has to do something. And lacking sufficient direction or instruction from the owner, she naturally resorts to normal means of doggy entertainment — chewing, digging and barking.

Separation Anxiety

House destruction usually occurs in the owner's absence, primarily because the puppydog is more likely to be bored when left at home alone. Also, a dog may resort to chewing because she becomes anxious when left alone, either because she misses her owner and/or because she lacks sufficient environmental stimulation. To compensate for the social void, the dog provides her own proprioceptive and kinaesthetic stimulation by vigorously and repetitively chewing clothing, household items, furniture, walls and in some cases, by chewing herself. Anxiety-fueled chewing often becomes stereotypically excessive and eventually assumes obsessive and compulsive proportions. Dogs chip and shred furniture like they are possessed, but even more disturbing, excessive grooming may lead to self-mutilation, whereby the poor dog licks herself raw, or gnaws away at her paws and tail.

The dog's anxiety is often exacerbated by the Jekyll and Hyde nature of the home environment: When the owner is home, the dog receives unlimited attention but when the owner is away, she is subjected to solitary confinement. Ironically, showering the dog with love and affection, causes the dog to miss the owner all the more. In such cases, the owner must build the dog's confidence and teach her to enjoy her own company when left alone, as well as resolving the manifested chewing problem. Luckily though, redirecting the dog's obsessive and compulsive chewing behavior goes a long way to assuaging the dog's fears and anxiety. Once the dog is happily ensconced chewing an appropriate object, she will not feel so lonely and depressed when left alone.

Separation Fun!

There is an additional reason why dogs invariably chew in the owner's absence. After repeated punishments, the dog quickly learns it is generally a bad policy to rip socks, shred carpets and destroy furniture when the owner is around. But since chewing is normal, natural and necessary, the dog simply waits for the owner to leave, before indulging her natural pastime. In fact, many dogs just can't wait for the owner to leave, so they may safely and peacefully act like a dog!

For any punishment-oriented training program to be effective, the dog must be punished each and every time he misbehaves. This, of course, is impossible because by and large, humans are inconsistent beasts. Rather than learning that chewing certain items is wrong, the dog surmises it is OK to chew when the owner is away or preoccupied. Thus the problem is unresolved. The dog continues to "misbehave," the owner becomes increasingly frustrated and the dog is frequently punished when the owner returns home. In such cases, many dogs become anxious with their owners' return, not their departure.

Even if humans were consistent, trying to curtail inappropriate chewing using punishment becomes an ineffective folly akin to The Myth of Sisyphus. For example, the average Labrador, without even moving his brain from first gear, can think of hundreds of wonderfully inappropriate items to destroy. This means hundreds of reprimands are necessary to even attempt to contain the problem. This is not much fun for the dog or for the owner. Much easier, more efficient, more effective and certainly, much (MUCH) more enjoyable, is to simply teach the dog what you would like him to chew.

Solutions

Whether teaching a new puppy household manners, or retraining an older dog with an existing chewing habit, the same sense of urgency exists. Puppies may develop a bad chewing habit at the drop of a hat and adult chewers can cause a lot of damage in a very short time. My record chewing case involved a male Akita that meted over \$10,000 worth of damage to the interior of a Mercedes in less than 25 minutes!

Whatever the reason for the dogs ill-directed chewing activities, the solution is always the same: To redirect the dog's chewing activities to articles which are both acceptable and appropriate and specifically designed for that purpose, i.e., to teach the dog to chew chewtoys. We must remember, it is not so much the dog's inclination to chew that is abnormal or wrong but rather, the dog's choice of chewtoys is inappropriate. Moreover, it is not the dog who considers his choice of chewtoys to be inappropriate but rather, the owner. Consequently, it behooves owners to provide chewtoys AND to teach the dog what they are for. It is no good just plonking down a bunch of toys and praying the dog will use them. The dog may still feel the couch is the Fisher Price of all chewtoys. Dogs can not read the instructions on chewtoy packaging, hence they may have no idea what they are for. The owner must actively teach the dog to chew chewtoys.

Whether training a new puppy or retraining an adult dog, try to prevent the puppydog from making a single mistake. Obviously, until the puppydog has been trained to chew chewtoys exclusively, never allow the puppydog unsupervised access to the whole house whether you are home or not. When at home, supervise the puppydog's activities, actively and passively teach the dog to chew chewtoys, and teach the dog how to wile away the long hours of social isolation when nobody is home. When not at home, make sure to leave the puppydog in an area where he can not damage household possessions but where there are many enticing and appropriate chewtoys to help pass the time of day.

A surprising number of chewing problems start when the owner is at home. The owner is reading a book, watching the telly, daydreaming, or sleeping in one room, while the dog is methodically dismantling another room. The owner may be catching a few rays in the garden, whilst the dog is demolishing the house. Or the owner may be indoors, whilst the dog is destroying garden furniture, hoses and plants. Do not set up the dog for failure. An unsupervised and untrained dog will invariably make mistakes and break rules he doesn't even know exist, whereupon the owner will become exasperated and invariably the dog will be punished once more. This is simply not fair. Consequently either pay attention to the dog, or confine him to an area where he can cause little, if any, damage.

Chewtoys

From the outset, encourage the dog to play with chewtoys. To heighten the dog's interest, waggle the chewtoy in front of his nose, toss it for the dog to retrieve, tie a string to the toy and drag it around the house, or hide the toy and encourage the dog to search for it. Pay absolute attention to the dog whenever he is allowed to investigate the house. Praise the dog when he plays with chewtoys and if ever the dog even starts to pay particular attention to any inappropriate item, instruct him to find a chewtoy and praise him for doing so. Characteristically, dogs resort to numerous attention-seeking ploys to train their owners. Once your dog learns, he only has to pick up a chewtoy to successfully solicit your approval and affection, he will happily chew chewtoys and you may happily praise your dog.

So what exactly is a chewtoy? A chewtoy is an item that is neither destructible nor consumable. Toy destruction necessitates regular replacement, which is bad for bank balance and eating toys may be decidedly bad for the dog's health. For most dogs, highly resilient Kongs, Big Kahunas and sterilised long bones are ideal, and rawhide chewies and cow hooves are fine for others. It is generally a bad idea to allow a dog to chew items of clothing, such as old shoes, or knotted towels. Not only may the pup destroy and consume these items but also, the dog may later generalize to new items of clothing. Puppies especially must be supervised when playing with plush toys and squeaky toys, to teach them to play gently and not destroy or eat the toy.

Whenever you cannot devote full attention to puppy supervision and training, restrict the dog to a small area. Get the pup used to little quiet moments in a suitable doggy den. A doggy den may be the dog's basket, mat, or bed, or a traveling crate, which is kept in the same room as the owner, so the owner may periodically praise the dog for settling down quietly and chewing chewtoys. If you have problems getting a young pup to stay in his bed, you may want to consider putting the pup on a short leash and clipping the leash to an eye-hook in the base board. When the dog is in his den, make sure chewtoys are the only chewable items within reach. This is a passive learning process. All you have to do is settle the dog in his den with a good supply of chewtoys and the dog learns to chew chewtoys (because there is little else to chew). In no time at all, the dog develops an acceptable chewtoy habit. And once established, good chewing habits are just as hard to break as bad habits.

Additionally, the owner should endeavor to prepare the dog how to cope with those unavoidable periods of confinement and/or social isolation when the owner is away. And of course, the owner can only do this when at home. Periodically confine the puppy for short periods to his playroom (confinement zone), such as the kitchen, garage or dog run. This gives the dog an opportunity to learn to enjoy confinement at a time when the owner is present to monitor the dog's behavior. Offer a couple of pieces of kibble each time you confine the dog, turn on the radio and make sure to leave plenty of extra special toys in the playroom.

Gourmet Stuffed Chewtoys

A wonderful ploy is to stuff a number of Kongs and Squirrel Dudes with kibble. Each evening, measure the dog's daily ration of kibble for the next day. Let the kibble soak in water, stuff it into the hollow chewtoys and then put them in the freezer overnight. The next morning you will have a handy supply of Kongsicles. Your dog will busy himself trying to extricate the kibble from the chewtoys. Your dog will happily amuse himself for hours on end. Reserve stuffed chewtoys for playroom enjoyment only and the dog will soon view confinement as an extra special opportunity to indulge in his favorite hobby — chewing chewtoys.

Once the dog enjoys the peaceful solitude of his own company, gradually and progressively increase the length of time he is confined. A dog, which is periodically confined to its playroom at times when the owner is at home, will be better equipped emotionally to weather confinement when the owner leaves.

And of course, once your dog has learned to chew chewtoys exclusively, whenever you are gone, he may enjoy full run of your house .

Reprimands?

If you ever catch the puppydog in the act of chewing inappropriate items — immediately instruct your dog, "Find your chewtoy!" and then praise the dog as soon as he starts to chew an appropriate item. Should you ever return home to find your home destroyed, go to some quiet corner, roll up a newspaper and reprimand yourself, "Silly owner!!!" How can you be so unbelievably silly, to let an uneducated puppy, or a dog with numerous prior chewing convictions have the run of your home with unrestricted access to valuable items. Please reread this article and then, confine your dog with stuffed chewtoys so that he learns to want to chew chewtoys. And then as an attractive bonus, once your dog is profitably employed as a recreational chewtoy chews, it is unlikely that he will become a recreational barker.

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