



## Destructive Chewing

Dogs and puppies can be destructive for a variety of reasons, and it is important to establish WHY your dog or puppy is chewing in order to best help them (and your belongings!).

### Teething / Puppyhood

At three weeks of age your puppy's first set of teeth start to come in. During his third month, these small teeth begin to fall out allowing the larger permanent teeth to come in, causing soreness, drooling and general discomfort. Your puppy will search for something to chew on during this period to relieve the soreness.

You must supervise your puppy during this period so you are ready to consistently and clearly show him what he should be chewing on. Give him chew toys designed for puppies to occupy his time. Avoid letting him chew on articles of clothing such as old shoes, slippers, etc. Your puppy will not know the difference between old and new clothing.

Remember, puppies need to learn how to use their mouth and one of the ways they do so is by putting their teeth on people inappropriately. This may sound silly, but it's important that a young puppy learn how hard is too hard (we refer to this as Acquired Bite Inhibition, or ABI). When puppies are young, we want to be sure that we don't punish them for using their mouth when they are gentle. When your puppy tries to chew on your hands or clothes, immediately redirect him to a more appropriate toy or game. And when your puppy plays too rough with his mouth, the best way to address the behavior is by saying something like, "Too bad!" and immediately stopping play and walking away from your puppy. It's important that your puppy learn that using his mouth too hard will send his humans away, and when he is polite, humans will keep playing with him.

### Causes for Destructive Chewing in Adolescent and Adult Dogs

Chewing is a normal and necessary behavior for dogs. If this behavior is uncontrolled, it becomes a habit. A POTENTIALLY EXPENSIVE ONE! The following are some reasons why dogs become destructive chewers:

- A. **Owner-absent Chewers** - This occurs when an owner gives the dog too much freedom before he is trust-worthy, and allows your dog to have free range of the home. No one is present to tell him he is wrong when he begins to chew on inappropriate objects.
- B. **Lack of Stimulation/Boredom** - Dogs need both physical as well as mental stimulation. When a dog is under-stimulated, he will find ways to stimulate himself; one of which is to chew. Most dog owners lead busy lives, which leaves very little time for the dog. A dog cannot be expected, especially when he is young, to lay around for 10-12 hours with nothing to do, especially if he has not been exercised prior to his "alone" time.
- C. **Rough-Housing** - Allowing your dog to play with old sneakers, slippers, socks, etc. results in the dog running around the house looking for these objects since you have inadvertently given him permission to play with them. Pulling and yanking these out of his mouth or using



your hands as a distraction by pushing and shoving, only makes him more orally fixated on people as well as articles of clothing.

- D. **Excessive Attention** - Some owners feel guilty about leaving their dog for 8 hours a day and attempt to make up the 8 hours in 1 or 2 by constantly petting, stroking or touching the dog for no reason. Also, over-emotional homecomings and departures can cause the dog to become stressed while you are away. All of this can eventually lead to anxiety which, in turn, will cause the dog to chew to relieve his stress.
- E. **Barrier Frustration** - When dogs are left behind closed doors, in cellars, garages, etc. for long periods of time, they can become quite stressed since they are social animals and need to be with others. They eventually begin to chew at walls, doorways, moldings, etc. in order to escape.
- F. **Emotional Upheavals** - When there is stress in the family environment (not involving the dog), the dog feels this but has no understanding of why. One way to relieve stress is to chew. Think of humans - nail biting is a common behavior exhibited by anxious, stressed people. It relieves anxiety and eventually becomes a habit. Habits are difficult to break.
- G. **Change in Daily Routine** - Dogs like to have a routine. This helps the dog understand what is expected of him. When owners break routines and lack consistency, the dog becomes anxious and may begin to chew.
- H. **Fear** - When a dog becomes frightened, he usually looks for something to help calm him down. Chewing is a great reliever of fear. Many dogs are extremely sensitive to noises (i.e. thunder, sirens, backfire of trucks, etc.) and these noises can put them into a state of panic. Chewing helps calm their stress.
- I. **Anxiety** - This is a more "slow brewing" emotion for a dog than a sudden fear response. Prolonged confinement, changes in routine and after-the-fact correction can produce a depressed, worried, anxiety-ridden dog. Chewing helps calm him down.
- J. **Diet** - Dogs under 6 months of age should be fed 3-4 times a day. Thereafter, dogs should be fed twice a day for life. If a dog is hungry, he will look for things to nibble and chew on. The dog's diet should be one of high-quality food.

### Prevention and Solutions

Unfortunately, destructive chewing usually takes place when you are not at home. The first thing to do is to remove the tension-producing causes discussed above. At the same time, teach your dog to chew on something which you perceive as appropriate. When you see your dog start to chew on something inappropriate, use an audible noise to interrupt the behavior, then redirect him to what he should be chewing on.

A. **Chew toys** - Take away all of your dog's "old" chew toys and replace them with new, safe toys and bones. Dogs, like children, get bored with the same toys day in and day out. Make sure you rotate his toys each day. If you put new items out on a daily basis, he will always be interested in playing with them. Give him lots of special attention whenever he picks up his toy. Verbally praise him or go over to him and give him a pat or take it and begin to play with him. Teach him that this is how he gets attention from you. Remember to stay away from leather or fabric toys. Your dog does not know the difference between the fabric toy on the floor and your fabric blouse.



Save a very special toy or bone for when you leave the house. Some suggestions might be:

1. **Marrow Bone.** You can purchase them from any butcher shop. Scrap off any excess fat. They do not need to be boiled in advance. Your dog will spend hours licking out the marrow. Once the marrow is gone, you can re-stuff the center with bits of food like biscuits, dry kibble, cottage cheese, peanut butter, string cheese, etc.
2. **The "Kong".** The "KONG" toy is probably the easiest, long lasting and most effective toy for a dog. They come in several sizes. You can take your dog's dry kibble and add some canned food, cottage cheese or other substance to make it sticky and pack the hollow portion of the Kong. This can be given to your dog when you leave. Stuff a few of them and leave them around the house so he can search for them - entertaining and rewarding himself. This can give your dog 1-2 hours of stimulation both from a mental (problem solving - how do I get the food out) as well as physical (searching, gnawing, licking and biting) standpoint. If your dog becomes a "Kong Pro" and figures out how to get the goodies out lightning fast, start to FREEZE the Kong so it takes longer!
3. **The "Buster Cube" and "Kong Wobbler".** These are two wonderful problem solving toys which will engage your dog for quite a while. You can put your dog's dry kibble inside and your dog pushes them around, hoping that food will fall out to reward him for his hard work. These toys are a must for dogs who self-feed and whose owners are away from home most of the day. Check out our handout on "Mental Stimulation" for other ideas here:  
<http://sthuberts.org/boredom-busting-ideas>

**B. Your Leaving Routine** – It's important to establish rules and boundaries for your dog and consistency is important. However, if you take a long time to say goodbye to your dog before you leave, if you apologize repeatedly for leaving, or act frantic while you leave (running around, searching for items like keys, pacing while you're waiting for another family member, etc.), you can inadvertently overstimulate your dog. If your dog becomes overstimulated and then suddenly depart, you leave your dog all "jazzed up" with no one to play with. That means your dog is likely to play with or chew on other items and if you were the cause of the overstimulation (even if it was an accident), your dog might just choose the items that smell most like you (the television remote, your clothes, your shoes, etc.). Spend the last few minutes before you leave relaxing (read the paper, drink some coffee and ignore your dog AFTER providing adequate exercise), then leave in a very matter-of-fact manner without making a fuss over your dog. When you return home, give your dog a gentle, brief greeting and take him outside to relieve himself. Avoid any apologies or fussing. Keep your exits and entrances low key or tension will build and chewing will start.

**C. Proper confinement.** By instinct, your dog is a den animal. Having a space of his own will be a comfort to him. If you have a puppy, he should be crate trained. If your adult dog is being destructive, he should also be put through the same crate training process.

The crate should be used anytime you are unable to supervise your dog. For example, at night, when you are away from the home, taking a shower, etc. The crate is used as your dog's babysitter so you know he is safe, as is your house. Remember, if your dog will be crated for any length of time, giving him something to do while in there (a stuffed Kong, for instance!) will help him keep himself busy and simultaneously teach him to love his crate! Do not use the crate as a dumping ground for your dog because he is unruly at times when you are home. When you are home, your dog should be with



you in the same room so he can learn to behave appropriately. Leaving your dog unsupervised, or allowing him to roam from room to room will certainly give him time to find something to chew on. Not only could he destroy valuable possessions, but he might swallow or eat something that could make him very sick. ***Freedom is earned, little by little, over time.***

**D. After-the-fact punishment.** If you have given your dog plenty of physical and mental stimulation in the morning and you still come home to find your clothing or furniture destroyed, your dog has been given freedom too soon. Obviously, he hasn't earned that freedom yet. The first thing to do is to confine him.

Punishing the dog after-the-fact by returning home hours, or even minutes later and "showing him" what he did wrong by dragging him to the object and yelling at him will have no effect on the dog other than to mistrust you since you are unpredictable. Sometimes you return home in a good mood; while other times you return angry and upset. ***After-the-fact corrections are useless and teach your dog nothing except fear, confusion, and mistrust.*** Dogs live in the immediate present. They can ONLY connect your praise or punishment with the behavior they are actually engaged in when you give it. A punishment can only be effective if you catch him "in the act". Your punishment must interrupt and end the unacceptable behavior, and should not be cruel or inhumane. Many owners assume the dog "knows better" and punish him for acting out. Your dog is NOT acting out of spite or misbehaving to get back at you for leaving him. If your dog could make the connection between the punishment when you get home and the "crime," he would certainly stop destroying objects to avoid punishment. No living creature enjoys being punished. If you come home and find a mess, ignore it! Bring your dog to another room so you can return and clean it up. Do not rant and rave. This may go against your natural inclination, but stay patient and follow the suggestions discussed above and you will see results.

**E. Exercise.** Destructive chewing is often caused by a dog who has pent-up energy. Even if you work all day, you must find the time to give your dog the physical exercise which he requires. Each person in your family should share in the responsibility of playing with, exercising, and walking your dog. You must get up 1/2 hour earlier in the morning to allow for time to play and walk your dog. Remember, exercise is good for you as well! If you have a fenced-in yard, spend time playing fetch, hide and seek, find it games, soccer, catch. Do not use your yard as a large crate by allowing the dog to be alone hoping he will get exercise. Dogs love to interact with others. Play builds a strong bond. If there is no one to interact with, his only option is to dig, fence run, bark, guard the house, chase small animals or chew on your patio furniture or house. This is not constructive time and will not eliminate his energy. He will become very independent and even worse, territorial aggressive as time goes on. Your dog should love to spend time with you and follow your rules; not make up his own.

At night, after dinner, take him for another walk; this time in a different direction. Taking him on the same path each day becomes less stimulating. Ask your children, spouse or significant other to join you. This can be a valuable time for you and your family to be together, as well as fulfilling your dog's needs. The dog loves it when the entire family is together.



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Many dogs need more than just daily walks to burn off their energy – remember, a simple walk doesn't tire out most humans either. Make the time to physically exercise your dog several times a week; your dog needs to RUN to burn off energy. ***A dog who never has his mind constructively engaged will become unruly and destructive. You must give your dog a job to do; otherwise he will find a job for himself - at your expense!***

F. **Spray deterrents.** There are a variety of scented sprays that may deter your dog from chewing, and they are better used for dogs that specifically chew one or two items and you just can't seem to change their mind about the item. If your dog is chewing everything, then you need to find out WHY your dog is chewing in order to stop the behavior. One type of spray deterrent is called Bitter Apple, which can be purchased in any pet supply store. It can be safely used to deter your dog from chewing on specific substances. Spray each area where your dog routinely chews. Make sure you spray the areas every day for at least two weeks until you notice that your dog has lost interest in those areas. If you are not consistent with the spray, your dog will randomly get rewarded because sometimes the item tastes good, while other times it does not. He will keep trying for those lucky tasteful days. It's also important to note that some dogs are not deterred by the spray deterrents because they don't mind the taste, so use this only as a last resort and make sure you have addressed the reason for your dog's chewing behavior prior to trying this.