

Dealing With Normal Puppy Behavior: Chewing

Puppies may be just as much work as human babies - maybe more so because puppies can't wear diapers and they have very sharp teeth! It's definitely true that, similar to infants and toddlers, puppies explore their world by putting things in their mouths. In addition, puppies are teething until they're about six months old, which usually creates some discomfort. Chewing not only facilitates teething, but also makes sore gums feel better. Although it's perfectly normal for a puppy to chew on furniture, shoes, shrubbery and such, these behaviors can be a problem for you. A puppy won't magically "outgrow" these behaviors as he matures. Instead, you must shape your puppy's behaviors and teach him which ones are acceptable and which aren't.

Discouraging Unacceptable Behavior

It's virtually inevitable that your puppy will, at some point, chew up something you value. This is part of raising a puppy! You can, however, prevent most problems by taking the following precautions:

- Minimize chewing problems by puppy-proofing your house. Put the trash out of reach, inside a cabinet or outside on a porch, or buy containers with locking lids. Encourage children to pick up their toys and don't leave socks, shoes, eyeglasses, briefcases or TV remote controls lying around within your puppy's reach.
- If, and only if, you catch your puppy chewing on something he shouldn't, interrupt the behavior with a loud noise, then offer him an acceptable chew toy instead and praise him lavishly when he takes the toy in his mouth.
- Make unacceptable chew items unpleasant to your puppy. Furniture and other items can be coated with "Bitter Apple" to make them unappealing (see our handout: "Sample Aversives for Dogs").
- Don't give your puppy objects to play with such as old socks, old shoes or old children's toys that closely resemble items that are off-limits. Puppies can't tell the difference!
- Closely supervise your puppy. Don't give him the chance to go off by himself and get into trouble. Use baby gates, close doors or tether him to you with a six-foot leash so you can keep an eye on him.
- When you must be gone from the house, confine your puppy to a small, safe area such as a laundry room. You may also begin to crate train your puppy (see our handout: "Crate Training Your Dog"). Puppies under five months of age shouldn't be crated for longer than four hours at a time, as they may not be able to control their bladder and bowels longer than that.
- Make sure your puppy is getting adequate physical activity. Puppies left alone in a yard don't play by themselves. Take your puppy for walks and/or play a game of fetch with him as often as possible.
- Give your puppy plenty of "people time." He can only learn the rules of your house when he's with you.

Encouraging Acceptable Behavior

- Provide your puppy with lots of appropriate toys (see our handout "Dog Toys and How to Use Them").
- Rotate your puppy's toys. Puppies, like babies, are often more interested in unfamiliar or novel objects. Put out four or five toys for a few days, then pick those up and put out four or five different ones.
- Experiment with different kinds of toys. When you introduce a new toy to your puppy, watch him to make sure he won't tear it up and ingest the pieces.
- Consider the various types of toys that can be stuffed with food. Putting tidbits of food inside chew toys focuses your puppy's chewing activities on those toys instead of on unacceptable objects.
- If your puppy is teething, try freezing a wet washcloth for him to chew on.

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What Not To Do

Never discipline or punish your puppy after the fact. If you discover a chewed item even minutes after he's chewed it, you're too late to administer a correction. Animals associate punishment with what they're doing at the time they're being punished. A puppy can't reason that, "I tore up those shoes an hour ago and that's why I'm being scolded now." Some people believe this is what a puppy is thinking because he runs and hides or because he "looks guilty." "Guilty looks" are canine submissive postures that dogs show when they're threatened. When you're angry and upset, the puppy feels threatened by your tone of voice, body postures and/or facial expressions, so he may hide or show submissive postures. Punishment after-the-fact will not only fail to eliminate the undesirable behavior, but could provoke other undesirable behaviors, as well.

Other Reasons For Destructive Behavior

In most cases, destructive chewing by puppies is nothing more than normal puppy behavior. Adult dogs, however, can exhibit destructive behaviors for a variety of reasons, which can occasionally be the cause of chewing problems in puppies, as well. Examples include separation anxiety, fear-related behaviors and attention-getting behavior. For help with these problems, contact our Behavior Helpline or a professional animal behaviorist.

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