

Chewing Solutions

While a classic source of dog owner frustration is chewed-up shoes, socks, underwear, books, rugs, baseboard, table legs, you name it, chewing is a natural behavior. In fact, chewing is vital for a dog's physical development.

Puppyhood is the most common time for chewing destruction to occur, but many dogs will maintain vigorous chewing as a lifelong hobby. So the keys are teaching your dog to redirect his or her jawing to acceptable items -- and keeping unacceptable ones out of reach.

The following tips can help save your stuff and your sanity:

- * Remember that a puppy or dog tend to have no recollection of recent activities. So unless you catch him in the acting of chewing something unacceptable, scolding won't help.

- * When you do catch him in the act, direct him to "leave it," "drop it" or "out." This requires that you teach your dog this command before putting it in action.

- * If the dog drops the item on command, praise lavishly and give him an acceptable substitute item to chew. If he does not drop the item, it's time to take out the leash and training collar to work on teaching him to release things from his mouth. (That's the subject of another Dog Tip; also consult books, web sites and recommended trainers for humane training techniques.)

- * Never hit the dog with the chewed item, or anything else. Don't scream at the dog after the fact; that will not work.

- * The Monks of New Skete book, "How To Be Your Dog's Best Friend," cautions: "Don't count on sprays, ointments, or magic saves to relieve you of chewing problems. While they may help to

a degree, the best method of chewing control is early vigilance, a sharp reprimand, and disciplinary action.'

* Puppy-proof the house. Remove your treasured items out of the dog's reach. Put socks in the hamper, place shoes in the closet. You might also have to temporarily remove throw rugs and block off some rooms. And watch the dog in places like the kitchen -- if he begins to gnaw on a cabinet edge or the tile floor, you'll need to immediately give a sharp, loud verbal command to stop him.

* Move appliance/lamp cords out of reach; dogs can chew on them and get electrocuted. Always block access to potentially poisonous plants, cleaning supplies and other risky items.

* When you bring a new dog home, give him one toy to focus chewing on. Especially for dogs with a destructive chewing habit, limit the number of toys.

* Spend time to really teach your dog what her approved toys are. Play together, using the toys as a focus. Your dog can learn what appropriate play items are only if you teach her.

* Start obedience training right after you get a new dog.

* Establish yourself as the "alpha."

* Suspend all treats during the process of retraining a dog with a real chewing problem.

* Spray Bitter Apple or sprinkle hot pepper sauce on favorite illicit chewing targets.

* Make sure the dog has access to approved chewtoys, especially during times you can't watch him.

* Keep a favorite approved toy away from a dog for a couple of

hours before you leave the house for extended periods -- then give it to him when you leave.

* Smear peanut butter on the inside of a Kong toy -- this can preoccupy a lonely dog for hours.

* Never give the dog old shoes or socks to chew on...he's not going to know the difference when he spies your new expensive new Air Jordans.

* For puppies or problem chewers: use a crate to safely confine the dog when you cannot watch him. When the dog is properly introduced and taught to accept a crate, and when the owner is not using the crate too many hours a day, crates are a wonderful, safe, humane tool for housebreaking and training good house manners. Never teach a dog that the crate is a place where he's being punished. Instead, teach him to associate good things with the crate: feed him in the crate, place his favorite toys in it, teach him it is his comfy, secure den.

* Exercise your dog -- every day. This will rechannel the energy he directed to problem chewing. Play catch, run with the dog -- make it active play. A tired dog is a content dog, and MUCH less likely to engage in destructive behaviors. Note: a puppy play group can work wonders.

* Lack of sufficient exercise and lack of obedience training are the roots of most dog problems...which are actually dog/owner problems.

* 10 or 15 minutes of training a day will make a world of difference. For puppies or dogs with short attention spans, try one-minute mini obedience sessions each day. Focus on consistent, positive reinforcement.

* Do not resort to hitting a dog with your hand -- and never hit a

dog with an object. If persistent, destructive behavior continues after teaching and practicing the "leave it" and other techniques mentioned above, consult a trainer. Also, good training books illustrate caught-in-the-act alternatives for humane physical discipline.

* For obedience training as well as for chewing problems, work with a good trainer. It's worth every penny.

* For chewing problems related to separation anxiety, see articles/books about helping a dog overcome separation anxiety.