

PREVENTING DESTRUCTIVE BEHAVIOR BY PUPPIES

Prepared by Daniel Q. Estep, PhD and Suzanne Hetts, PhD,
Animal Behavior Associates, Inc.

4994 S. Independence Way, Littleton, CO, 80123 (303) 932-9095

The first thing you should know is that chewing and digging by puppies are perfectly natural, normal behaviors. It is unlikely that anything you do will stop these behaviors completely. What we will try to do is give you some things to do to lessen the damage. You should accept the fact that if you own a dog you will experience property damage and lose something of value. The basic strategy in preventing puppy damage is to 1) prevent access to things that you don't want damaged, or to make those things give the animal an unpleasant experience when she tries to damage it, and 2) provide acceptable things to chew and places to dig.

PUPPY CHEWING

Puppies are very oral beings. One of the main ways they explore their world is to put things in their mouths and chew on them. Teething occurs in puppies up to six to eight months of age. This can make chewing problems even worse in young animals.

1. Puppy proof your house. This means keeping things that can be destroyed out of reach of the animal. Keep clothes, children's toys, and other small objects off the floor. Keep closets, drawers, and toy boxes closed any time the puppy is out. Remove objects from lower shelves, end tables, or any other surface the puppy can reach.

2. Keep a close watch on your puppy. Never let your puppy run loose in the house without supervision. If there are times you cannot watch the puppy, put her in a secure area like a kitchen with baby gates at the doors to prevent escapes, in a dog exercise pen, or in a crate or dog kennel. (If you use a crate or kennel be sure that the dog has been properly crate trained. To do otherwise may create other problems.) You could also leash the dog to your belt to keep her out of mischief.

3. For objects that may be chewed that you cannot prevent your puppy from gaining access to, try to make them aversive by coating the surfaces with Bitter Apple, a hot sauce, or Listerine mouthwash (be sure the surface is color fast and that the material will not damage the surface). For other things that cannot be treated in this way, make the areas around the objects unpleasant by putting down plastic rug runner (pointy side up), motion detectors such as The Scraminal, or vibration sensors such as The Tattle Tale. Be consistent in discouraging chewing of inappropriate objects. Never encourage it.

4. If you catch your puppy chewing some inappropriate object, tell her "NO", take it away from her and give her an appropriate chew object. Never punish your puppy for chewing things after the fact. Punishment is neither effective nor appropriate if you don't catch the animal in the act.

5. Provide plenty of acceptable chew toys such as Nylabones, Kong Toys, cattle hooves, sterilized large beef bones, or rawhide chewies (check with your veterinarian about what are safe, acceptable chew toys). You may have to experiment with different objects to find ones that your puppy likes. Praise and reward your puppy for chewing appropriate things.

6. Never give your puppy old clothes, shoes, or children's toys as chew toys. The puppy may not learn the difference between them and your good clothes, shoes, etc.

7. If these things don't help, or if the destructiveness gets worse, consult a professional for help.

(OVER)

PUPPY DIGGING

1. Puppy proof your yard, garden and flower beds, and any indoor area that may be scratched such as doors, carpets and rugs. Put up fences or other barriers to keep her out of unwanted areas.

2. Booby trap other areas that the puppy cannot be kept out of. Fill in holes and stretch hardware cloth over the area to make it unpleasant to dig. Inside, put out plastic carpet runner, Scat Mat or other devices to make scratched areas unpleasant to scratch.

3. For a puppy that is strongly motivated to dig, set aside a part of your yard for her to dig in and reward digging in that area.

4. Seek professional help if the digging continues or gets worse.

REMEMBER: AN OUNCE OF PREVENTION IS WORTH A POUND OF CURE. IT IS FAR EASIER TO ESTABLISH GOOD HABITS FROM THE BEGINNING THAN TO TO BREAK BAD HABITS LATER.