DESTRUCTIVE CHEWING

Owning a destructive dog is frustrating, difficult and expensive. Often, owners of such dogs want an instant cure for their problems. That is totally understandable! Sadly, such cures rarely exist. Most destruction problems are solved through a combination of good detective work, environmental engineering and obedience training.

The first steps in solving the chewing problem are exactly the same as in solving housebreaking problems (explained in depth in the Housebreaking article available on this website): the dog MUST be checked for physical abnormalities, which might be causing or contributing to the destruction and the diet must be considered. Suspicion must fall on physical problems when the dog cannot seem to control itself and chews improperly even when the owner is present. If a dog is suffering from pancreatic disease, worms, mouth or throat problems, retained or misaligned teeth or dietary deficiency, all corrective attempts will fail because in such cases the root cause of the chewing is physical distress. In fairness to your dog, you should schedule a full physical exam for him or her before embarking on any corrective program. A bit of time spent researching dog foods can also open your eyes as to the differences in them. Sometimes dog being fed even top quality foods need something different or at least digestive enzymes added so they can more easily digest and absorb the nutrients. If a dog’s nutritional needs are not met, either through a lack in the food itself or because of an inability to digest the food properly, the dog may chew and eat many strange things in a desperate attempt to fill the lack. For years, there was among trainers, a shared knowledge that a mineral deficiency could cause excessive chewing. Giving suspect dogs a plain old multi mineral supplement sometimes caused an end or at least a slow down to chewing. This has now been verified via veterinary research. Any dog that chews and eats strange things, ESPECIALLY DRYWALL, should be suspected of having a mineral deficiency and started on a multi mineral supplement available from any good human health food store. I recommend that the minerals be started at least 3 weeks before beginning a correction program. Commonly, owners are unsure whether the minerals are helping until they discontinue them and see a sudden upsurge in destruction. Minerals rarely cure the entire problem because chewing can become a habit but the addition to the diet may help correct the root cause.

Puppies going through the double whammy of losing baby teeth and gaining adult teeth are obviously suffering from physical distress, which, must be considered as you deal with them. The most painful teething stage lasts from 3 ½ to 6 months with the need to chew remaining high until the jaw itself has finished growing.

If you have a puppy that is chewing, keep in mind that chewing is NORMAL and necessary. Mis-directed chewing is what does in the carpets, stereos, furniture and teddy bears!

Eliminating the possibilities of physical problems is the first step in your detective work. As you are going through that phase, keep a chart of everything the dog chews and when the chewing takes place. Many times, such a chart can provide you with startling insight about your dog’s misbehavior. Chewing that only occurs on a Thursday morning could be triggered by something as simple as upset over the garbage man! I feel just as strongly about the use of dog crates in resolving chewing problems as I do about using them to solve housebreaking problems. If a dog owner knows about crating
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and refuses to crate, I have no sympathy for them when they repeatedly come home to rampant destruction. I have GREAT sympathy for the poor dog who may be repeatedly punished for behaviors which could have been prevented by using a crate. Not to mention the fact that after the fact correction has absolutely no positive value since dogs do not have the ability to learn from late correction. The expense of a crate is minimal compared to the cost of carpeting, furniture, walls, doors, etc. If you return home every day dreading the discovery of new damage to your home and property, get a crate immediately. Not only does a destructive dog cause mayhem in the house, it may destroy itself if it chews on electric cords, pill bottles, sharp objects, some plants and objects like some CD’s which contain poison!

If your dog cannot be crated because he or she panics when crated, you may well be dealing with more than just a chewing or housebreaking problem. Separation anxiety can cause dogs to have “panic attacks” and to chew, soil, cry, drool, and wildly attempt to escape. In such cases, working with both a veterinarian and a trainer will probably be necessary to help the dog.

If your dog or puppy is housebroken and only chews one or two predictable things, try using anti-chewing products such as Bitter Apple which comes in both a spray and a paste form. All of the liquid products evaporate quickly and need to be applied liberally and repeatedly throughout the day to be effective. The paste is extremely effective on things like wires but it is messy. Before you get too carried away, consider that if your oral dog ONLY chews the scatter rug by the back door, it might be prudent to occasionally get a new rug rather than chase him away and have him decide to chew the wall to wall carpet instead!

Check over your dog’s playthings. A non-destructive dog can have just about SAFE toy to chew upon but a destructive dog needs to have a very special but limited toy chest. I am on record as opposing rawhide treats of all kinds simply because they sometimes cause serious internal blockages. Beyond that, they have a tendency to create an expensive addiction to leather and they teach a dog to destroy. When you hand a dog a stuffed toy or a leather tasting toy or an old sock or shoe or ANY toy he can either quickly destroy or confuse with similar objects in the house, you may actually be making destructive chewing problems worse.

Although no chew toy is totally indestructible, a few will last most dogs quite some time before they need to be replaced. The following toys are the most suitable for destructive dogs because they usually cannot be quickly destroyed yet they fulfill chewing needs. Please insure that you get toys that are the correct size for your dog! Cheapest and often the dog’s favorite are sterilized natural bones. These natural bones will be a part of and anti-chewing program I will outline shortly. Hard English Rubber toys, Nylabones and any other toy labeled in some way as hard to destroy. Be careful with any balls that are slick and small enough to go down your dog’s throat – they can kill. If your dog already has or has had NYLABONES and has refused to chew them, try roughing the ends with a rasp or a file and rubbing something wonderful like bacon grease on the roughened ends. Once they start chewing them, they will usually return. Large tough rope toys can be good for dogs who prefer chewing softer items.
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Pups who are teething should be given ice cubes and toys that have been put in the freezer. Helps reduce the pain.

I cannot stress enough how important it is to become involved in obedience training when you are trying to resolve any type of behavioral problem. As you train, you build a better relationship with your dog; your status evolves to a higher level; the dog becomes calmer and develops more self-control and many behavioral problems simply seem to dissolve even without direct attention.

If there are children in the house, you might consider a new house rule: anything on the floor belongs to the dog. Your house might stay tidier and upset over chewed toys that belong to the children should diminish as they take more responsibility for what is left around.

You can help your dog or pup make wiser choices about what to chew by providing proper toys, treating things you know the dog might chew with anti chewing substances like Bitter Apple (set up the dog by leaving socks, books, kid’s toys, etc. around the house in places the might normally find them but ALWAYS treated with Bitter Apple or the like), picking up all chewable objects from the floor or low furniture to remove temptation and crating the dog when you cannot supervise it.

Many chewing problems only occur when the dog is left alone in the house. This chewing is usually caused by boredom, loneliness, anxiety or fear. Whatever the reason, when the time comes to wean your dog out of its’ crate, you will want the dog’s attitude towards your departures to be positive instead of negative. Get some hollow sterilized natural bones and fill them with wonderful stuff like peanut butter, leftover mashed potatoes and gravy, cheese – whatever your dog finds yummy. Freeze them. For several days when you crate your dog, which you should always do calmly and impersonally, give him a frozen bone just as you crate him. When you come home, retrieve the bone, refill it and refreeze it. The only time your dog gets this bone is in his crate while you are gone. PLEASE be certain that all of your arrivals and departures are calm and unemotional. Act as though you are going out to get the newspaper when you go out and like you are engrossed in reading it when you return. Never rush in to release a dog or give emotional lectures or hugs when you leave. Your calm emotional state may prevent the dog from being left in a high state of arousal and your calm return gives him no reason to get supercharged over your absence. When you have spent some time (read however many days or weeks that takes you!) and your dog is used to cheerfully going into his crate for his bone, simply crate your dog, give him his bone and leave – with the crate door left open. When you return home (short trips are always best at first), be neutral, ignore anything that went wrong, pick up the bone and re-freeze it. That’s right, I said ignore any destruction that has taken place, if any has. One more time: AFTER THE FACT CORRECTION DOES NO GOOD. Since destruction is usually triggered by emotional upset on the dog’s part, don’t feed into it in any way. Give the dog several days to adjust to his new freedom. If there are accidents or chewing incidents at first, they may well disappear once the dog adjusts to life outside his crate. If chewing does take place, the next time you leave, treat whatever the dog chewed with Bitter Apple before you leave. If the dog is just too destructive to be loose or does not improve within a few days, just return to crating for another month or two and then try again.
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Believe it or not, this simple, non-violent method usually works beautifully when actually followed step by step and not rushed.

I hope that you have noticed that I have not recommended any form of punishment for destructive behaviors. I find they are rarely needed and rarely successful. I call this a correction program simply because the hoped for outcome is a correction of a chewing problem, not a correction of the dog.

Here are some further hints and thoughts:

1. Wall chewing is sometimes triggered by the presence of mice, squirrels or other rodents and even, with really sensitive dogs, bugs!
2. It is not uncommon for a destructive dog to cease its’ bad behaviors after a NON-DESTRUCTIVE companion animal is introduced into the household.
3. Sometimes, feeding a destructive dog twice a day instead of once a day will eliminate hunger based chewing.
4. Keep access to bedrooms, bathrooms, basements, closets, etc. limited by closing doors.
5. If you chart chewing and find that your dog is quite predictable, using your crate during only the high risk times may work well.
6. Schedule changes within the household including work, school, vacation changes, someone home due to illness, school vacations, time changes, new baby schedules, house guests, etc. can cause some dogs stress and trigger chewing. Be extra careful at such times and don’t be afraid to return to using a crate for a short time to keep your dog secure.
7. At times of great emotional stress in the family like deaths, divorce, injuries, weddings, births, etc. it is not uncommon for dogs to chew. Either board the dog or use your crate.
8. Keep the dog’s teeth clean. Tartar build up irritates the gums which leads to chewing.
9. Teach destructive dogs to stay off the furniture. May save the couch!
10. Watch out for food crumbs and spills on furniture. Makes the furniture into a possible meal for the dog!
11. Destructive dogs should not have doggie beds if they destroy them.
12. Use environmental controls when ever possible to save yourself headaches. Whenever you can, short circuit destruction by making it impossible to begin with. Put the trash in dog proof containers or closed rooms or sheds; install a metal guard on doors being damaged by scratching; pick up clothes, toys and shoes and put them away; keep closet doors closed; install a basket to catch the mail. Limited destruction is often more easily stopped by environmental controls than by training.

As much as I am a proponent of crating for training, I am also totally against using crates as forever answers. Every effort should be made to wean dogs out of their crates so they can be physically comfortable and happier. Good Luck!

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