

Training your dog:

Destructive Behaviour

Destructiveness is not uncommon in puppies and adolescent dogs, and can be for a number of reasons. It is important to understand why the dog is being destructive in order to be able to cure the problem effectively. The most common reasons for destructive behaviour, their tell-tale signs, and what to do about them are described below. Whatever the reason for the behaviour, one important factor in affecting a cure is to **stop all punishment**. Dogs' memories are extremely short, and unless you actually catch him in the act, your dog simply will not be able to understand why you are angry. Punishing him when he doesn't know why is counter productive and may turn a minor problem into a full blown separation anxiety; the dog wants you to return because he is lonely, but is afraid of how you will greet him when you do come home.

Problem : Boredom

Bored dogs are often destructive when left alone, as they try to find something to occupy them, and young dogs especially need plenty of both physical and mental exercise. Where boredom is the reason for the destructiveness you may also find that the dog tends to destroy things even when you are at home, as well as when you are not there, simply for something to do when there is nothing else exciting going on.

Working breeds such as Border Collies, German Shepherds etc are particularly likely to become bored and destructive when left alone for long periods.

Solutions:

- Increase the amount of exercise the dog is getting, particularly when he is going to be left alone. A really good, long energetic run (at least an hour free running) first thing in the morning will help to tire the dog and make him less restless. Make sure he has at least half an hour to settle after exercise before you leave him.
- If possible, arrange for someone to come and walk the dog during the day for you if you are going to be out all day.
- Have a session of obedience training every day to stimulate the dog mentally as well as physically.
- Leave plenty of safe things for him to chew when you go out, such as a stuffed Kong or a Buster Cube which he has to work at, or hard nylon chews or baked bones.
- Remove all these things on returning home so that he only has access to them when you are not there with him.

Problem : The dog may not have learned what is, and what is not acceptable to chew

If toys are left around for the dog all the time he may inadvertently pick up other things such as shoes left on the floor. Similarly if he is allowed to chew old shoes or

slippers he cannot be expected to understand that he is not supposed to chew your best shoes, especially as they carry your scent in the same way as the old pair.

Dogs that haven't learned what they should or shouldn't chew generally chew anything and everything, whether someone is present in the house or not, although they usually learn to sneak off and chew something when you are not looking to avoid being punished. Confusion may have arisen if the dog has been punished for chewing things like chair legs or cushions, but hasn't made the connection between the action and your displeasure.

Solutions:

- Negative reinforcement is far more effective than punishment - this means making the act of chewing the wrong thing unpleasant instead of making yourself unpleasant when he is chewing the wrong thing! A foul tasting substance such as "Bitter Apple" spray (available from the surgery) sprayed onto all the things he has chewed, or is likely to chew, such as furniture legs, cupboard door knobs etc ensures that he instantly finds chewing the wrong thing unpleasant, and will be less and less likely to try again. If you see him nibbling at something that hasn't been sprayed, instead of shouting at him, throw something like a bunch of keys (or Training Discs) to startle and distract him. Then praise him for leaving what he was about to chew and offer him a toy or chew instead. Have available a variety of dog toys and chews, but only give him 2 or 3 at a time, changing them often so he doesn't get bored with the same ones all the time.

Problem : Young dogs NEED to chew

Puppies start to lose their milk teeth at around 5 months old, and over the next few weeks their adult teeth develop and grow. At around 6 - 9 months old, many young dogs seem physically to need the specific exercise provided by chewing hard things, to strengthen their jaws and new teeth.

Solutions:

This physical need can be satisfied by directing their efforts, as described above, onto acceptable but useful items such as baked bones and hard chew toys such as Nylabone. Dental chews such as Rask may also be helpful.

Problem : Separation Anxiety

The dog may be unable to cope with isolation and separation from his owners - this gives rise to stress and anxiety with physical symptoms that the dog is unable to control, and may be manifest not only in destructive behaviour, but also in house soiling and/or barking and howling when left alone. (Rescue dogs are particularly prone to this condition, especially if they have been rehomed more than once). Characteristically, the destructiveness is aimed more at exit points, such as door or window frames, carpets and skirting boards, although other items may also be destroyed - often things that smell strongly of the owners such as clothing, cushions or bedding. Dogs suffering from Separation Anxiety are usually very clingy, staying close to their owners and following them everywhere around the house. This is a behaviour problem, and requires careful and sympathetic treatment, and, sometimes, supportive drug therapy.

If you feel your dog suffers from Separation Anxiety rather than the more easily managed problems described above, contact the surgery for a behaviour consultation. In the mean time, it is important to remember that Separation Anxiety is a condition with physical symptoms that the dog cannot control, and punishment is pointless and counter-productive.

This information has been compiled by
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