

## **ESCHEW CHEWING CATASTROPHES GETTING YOUR DOG TO CHEW THE RIGHT THING**

Canine chewing sprees can be as expensive as they are frustrating. My most expensive case history involved an Akita that meted out \$10,000 worth of damage to the interior of a Mercedes in a little under half an hour. In most situations, doggy devastation occurs in the owner's absence, usually when the dog is left home alone.

### **HOME ALONE**

Frustrated at their inability to correct the dog when it misbehaves, many owners resort to punishing the dog for welcoming their return home. But perhaps there is a better way. Indeed, teaching a dog how to entertain itself and wile away the long hours when left at home alone is one of the most important ingredients of domestic education.

Dogs chew out of necessity, boredom, anxiety or enjoyment. Puppies especially have a strong urge to chew. Not only do they chew to relieve the irritation and inflammation of teething but also, pups characteristically investigate the environment with jaw and paws. Everything is pawed, sniffed, licked or chewed to see whether it is sentient or inanimate, whether it is tasty or yucky and whether it is indestructible or fun to destroy. Moreover, regular chewing is essential for maintaining the health of the dog's teeth, jaws and gums. Thus, chewing is a perfectly normal, natural and necessary canine behavior.

The problem is not that the dog chews but rather, what the dog chews. Consequently, prevention and treatment of wanton house destruction should focus on redirecting the dog's chewing proclivities exclusively to articles that the owner considers to be both appropriate and acceptable chewtoys.

If we try to look at things from the dog's point of view, there are only so many things a dog can do when left at home alone for long periods of time. It is not as though the dog can watch the soaps on the television, do needlepoint or complete The Times crossword puzzle. When left alone, the dog's choices of recreational activities are severely limited: Really all the poor dog can do is chew, dig, bark or snooze. Many chewing extravaganzas are the result of boredom – simply a result of the dog's relentless quest for some way to pass the time of day.

Separation anxiety is often cited as a cause for the dog's owner-absent destructive behavior. Dogs chew to relieve the anxiety of being left alone. Dependent dogs react worse to weekday solitary confinement if they are allowed unrestricted access to their loving owners at other times, for example during evenings and weekends.

It is vitally important to foster confidence and independence by actively teaching a companion dog how to enjoy the peace and quiet of its own company, and specifically how to amuse itself and pass the time of day when its human companion is not at home. Otherwise, the dog will focus on the owner's absence and fret, panic and pine for the absent owner. Thus, when at home it is a sound policy to periodically confine the dog for short periods with chewtoys for amusement. Not only will the dog become accustomed to confinement but also, the owner may monitor the dog's behavior when confined.

Many dogs, however, are not the least bit anxious when their owners leave. In fact, they relish being left at home alone – a wonderful opportunity to act like dogs and specifically to have a good chew without catching any flak from their killjoy owners. Perhaps separation relief would be a more accurate and descriptive term than separation anxiety for the etiology of most dogs' owner-absent chewing.

### **CHEWTOYS**

Whatever the cause of chewing – animal nature, boredom, anxiety or fun – the solution entails redirecting the dog's chewing tendencies to appropriate chewtoys. Chewtoys should be both indestructible and non-consumable.

The choice of chewtoy depends on the strength and compulsive nature of the dog's chewing. Rawhide, Kongs and open-ended longbones (e.g., beef femurs, now commercially available in pet stores) are fine with most dogs but not others. When compared to the cost of re-upholstering one couch, \$100 worth of chewtoys seems to be a pretty wise investment for dog owners.

For some dogs, just putting down a few chewtoys is sufficient to successfully redirect chewing activities. However, most owners must actively train their dogs to enjoy chewing chewtoys.

One way to do this is by lure-coursing stuffed chewtoys along the kitchen floor on the end of a string. Both Kongs and bones are hollow and may therefore be stuffed with goodies to heighten the dog's interest and entice it to chew them exclusively. To prevent the dog from getting fat, ensure the treats are part of the dog's daily diet (primarily kibble, high-fiber biscuits and the occasional liver treat). Use kibble or biscuits to cork the end of each bone or toy so the dog may quickly bite off the protruding part of the treat and then extricate the rest only after worrying at the toy for several minutes.

Also, try squishing a really tasty treat (cheese or freeze-dried liver) into the bony trabeculae in the middle of the marrow cavity of a bone so the dog may smell the treat, see the treat (and maybe even talk to the treat) but can never get it out.

### **INSTANT GRATIFICATION**

Different shaped dog biscuits are ideal for stuffing Kongs; some shapes go in and come out easily, while others have to be forced in and require human fingers to extract. Thus, after the owner leaves the house, the dog will be instantly rewarded for investigating chewtoys and then rewarded again for working on them for awhile, whereafter the dog will continue to nibble and gnaw at the chewtoys for quite some time knowing there are more (tastier) treats inside.

On returning home, instruct the dog to fetch its chewtoys and pull the biscuits from the Kongs and use a pencil to poke out the tasty treats from the bones. Human manual dexterity and tool use never fails to impress the canine mind, making the dog more inclined to search for chewtoys when it wakes from its afternoon nap in expectation of the owner's return.

The above procedures maximize the likelihood the dog will chew chewtoys during the two crepuscular (dawn and dusk) and unintentionally trained peaks in owner-absent chewing activity – immediately after owners leave home and immediately prior to their return.

### **PASSIVE TRAINING**

Apart from using treats to increase the intrinsic value of chewtoys and actively training dogs to enjoy chewing chewtoys, passive training techniques offer a user-friendly, time-efficient, sure-fire way to cement the dog's chewtoy habit. Passive training routines simply involve setting up the training scenario, whereby the dog trains itself. Wonderful!

When away from home, confine the dog to a single room (e.g., the kitchen or utility room) that contains nothing for the dog to destroy. Obviously, if confined to the kitchen the dog cannot destroy living room carpets, curtains and furniture. Also, if confined to the kitchen with nought for company but half a dozen intelligently stuffed chewtoys, the dog will quickly develop a chewtoy habit.

Similarly, when at home the dog may be safely and profitably left for variable periods in its long-term confinement area when the owner is unable to supervise the dog. Not only will this encourage the dog to chew chewtoys but also, it will help the dog adjust to confinement when left at home alone. Alternatively, the owner may confine the dog for short periods to a smaller area, such as the dog's bed or crate, with nothing within reach apart from a couple of stuffed chewtoys.

There is a plethora of obnoxious doggy habits which may be prevented if the dog is otherwise gainfully employed chewing chewtoys.

## DAVID LETTERDOG'S LIST OF 10 THINGS A DOG CANNOT DO WHILE CHEWING A CHEWTOY

1. Chew carpets, curtains, couches, clothes, chair legs, children's toys and electrical cords or consume famous books on dog behavior.
2. Bark incessantly. The dog may still bark at disturbances, but it is less likely to bark recreationally because now it is busy chewing recreationally.
3. Run in ever-decreasing obsessive compulsive circles, anxiously chasing its tail, or excessively licking or chewing paws and the root of its tail, causing self-mutilation.
4. Play-bite or mouth your hand, nip ankles, grab the lead or play tug o' war with your tie or trousers.
5. Destroy garden furniture and hoses, consume cat feces and dog stools or eat flowers and poisonous plants.
6. Dig. Certainly the dog can hold a chewtoy in its jaws and dig, but if really working at treats inside the chewtoy, it would hardly be inclined to dig a hole to bury the chewtoy.
7. Noisily lick private parts in the company of great aunts or children.
8. Lick your face with the same tongue that was used to perform number 7.
9. Borrow the car, write bad checks or run up the charge card. (Just checking to see if anyone is actually reading this article.)
10. Become bored or anxious and otherwise dream of bolting through the front door or escaping from the yard.

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