

DESTRUCTIVE CHEWING

By Susan Carney

Chewing is a natural behavior for dogs. They use their mouths to explore the environment in the same way that humans use their hands. Destructive chewing usually takes place when the owner is not with the dog. Therefore punishment is inappropriate because you are not there when the behavior happens.

There are many reasons for chewing:

The **LONELY dog** is one that is alone for long periods in an un-stimulating environment. These dogs chew out of boredom.

Boredom is not always alleviated by long walks. Dogs need three kinds of exercise; Running and walking, wrestling and body slamming and incessantly chewing! All are very different and it is a must to provide all three in order to help with boredom.

The anxious or fearful dog is one who suffers from feelings of isolation and anxiety. Dogs are pack animals and being alone is uncomfortable. In nature, a dog left alone will hide and not draw attention to itself. If your dog is allowed to wander the entire house when alone, s/he may feel it is their job to protect it. Anxiety and fear come into play when the dog feels like s/he cannot do the job and will show itself with shaking, vomiting and hiding. Generally anxiety about being alone does not include destructive chewing. A dog that destroys the home has other issues. You can move the "responsibility of guarding" the home or the "feeling of vulnerability" by providing a place to call their own (a crate or baby gated room).

The dog with leadership issues is one that thinks s/he is the leader of the pack and frustrated, at you, for leaving without permission or without taking them. They cannot protect you if you leave them behind. Therefore they make noise, bark, and destroy things in an effort to get you to return.

To remedy any of the above behaviors, seriously consider the use of a crate or baby gated room. The first step in stopping destructive chewing is to make it impossible for the dog to chew anything while you are working on the behavior.

A crate or kennel will give you the control you need and tap into the dog's natural instinct to den and give it a safe haven for dealing with the anxiety, fear or boredom he or she is experiencing.

A small "mud room" or bathroom can serve the same purpose, however, these rooms are usually not "dog proof" and dogs find more comfort being in an area where you normally spend a lot of time. So, a crate in the kitchen or living room is truly your best option.

Next, we must again remember that chewing is natural and necessary for dogs to alleviate extra energy, stress and boredom so you will need to provide toys. We would suggest the following;

Busy Toys for boredom: Find toys that "do something" when they are chewed. Or, make your own toys. Stuff treats in a Kong and cover up the end with Peanut Butter. Cut open a squeaky toy, pull out all the stuffing and the squeaker and add dry food, treats and another toy. This makes the toy more interesting and it takes longer to play and get everything out. In the summer, freeze toys and treats in a



freezable bowl then let your dog chew on the ice block while you are away. You can freeze treats in icecubes or soak and freeze that squeaky toy to change the texture.

Other acceptable toys: Nyla bones, real bones with a hollow center or hard rubber toys. The bones become more interesting as a dog works on them. Place new toys in your laundry bin or sleep with it so it smells like you, to help your dog feel more secure as well. Your dog craves your company the most and with a toy that smells like you s/he will feel better with a familiar smell.

Unacceptable toys: old shoes, socks, towels or clothing. Dogs cannot differentiate between a pair of shoes that are old, and a pair that are new. Avoid confusing your dog by giving him things that can be mistaken for forbidden objects.

How do you say, goodbye when heading off to work. Do you feel guilty, are their long good byes or a series of begging, pleading or threatening gestures asking your dog to be good. Do you get your dog all excited with a hug and a pat and then leave? The way you say good-bye can set the tone for chewing and anxiety.

The right way to say good-bye is to say nothing at all. No gestures, no hugs, no words. Your dog should be focused on one of the toys listed or be too tired to care and you should slip out the door.

In order for your dog to focused on that something else and “ready” for you to go, be sure s/he gets plenty of exercise before you go to work. A 20-minute walk, breakfast and 2-3 toys filled with treats is plenty to keep your dog busy for a few hours and then opt for a long nap while he or she awaits your return. Try it! Get yourself up early and go for a walk, then feed your dog breakfast while you shower and prepare to leave. Next grab the Kongs (or other suggested toys) and fill it with dry food, a few treats, and peanut butter. Toss the Kong and at least two other toys into the crate and your dog will go right in, shut the door and off to work you go.

Leaving a radio or TV on for background noise can also help. The noise drowns out concerning noises outside and simply calms the dog with every day indoor sounds.

Now, let us look at leadership and how you say, "hello," when you return. Do you rush right to your dog when you get home, saying, "Hi" and catering to his or her every need? If you do, it's time to stop. The greeting ritual that your dog goes through when they first see you (after any separation) is not an indication of love; but rather their attempt at re-establishing the order of the pack. What you are seeing is a “checking in and inspection,” “is it you?” "are you hurt?" "did anything change?" If you give attention to your dog first, the message you are sending is; they ARE first and therefore, in charge (the leader.)

We suggest:

Ignore your dog when you first come home. Head straight for the oven and set the timer for 3 to 5 minutes. Hang up your coat, change your shoes and take care of you first. This sends the message: “Yes, I am home, everything is fine and by the way, I am the leader.” Defining leadership, in your dogs mind, is the single most important thing your dog needs to settle down bad behavior.

See our **Leadership and Behavior** handout on the web at www.nhspca.org.



The crating process

If your dog was crated as a puppy or is still a puppy it should be easy to introduce or re-introduce the crate in to his/her life. It's a bit harder to introduce to an adult dog but, the rules are the same. Set it up on the weekend and in a place that is common for family to be (kitchen or living room) and start using it when you don't need to. Toss in a treat and latch the dog in while walking around the house, doing chores for 10 minutes. Toss a treat in and go out to get the mail. Let the dog out when you return and praise for a job well done.

When its time to go back to work on Monday; plan on using the crate for two weeks before you "try" leaving the dog out to see what happens...and even then be sure the dog is allowed out and into only one baby gated room. The whole house is off limits for now and freedom within the house will be earned over time. 3 - 6 months to be exact.

In the crate there should be a towel or small blanket that you don't care about, and tow to three of the above described "busy toys." Your goal is to have the dog so completely interested in the toy or too tired to care that you are leaving.

After two weeks put the dog and one toy in the crate but do not latch the door. Leave and let the dog discover on its own - "i'm free." Hide the rest of the "busy toys" in the room (don't forget the baby gate) and allow the dog to discover them as well. A properly stuffed toy will keep your dog busy for at least 10 - 30 minutes and then a nap should be in order.

Every new puppy or dog owner should expect a certain amount unfamiliarity, fear, anxiety and even leadership issues. Human nature is to comfort and let them be free in the house. However, too much love, too much comforting and too much freedom will work against the natural boundaries your dog craves. So don't be afraid to be a bit bossy, have strict rules and lighten up later when the behavior subsides.

Please do not hesitate to call for assistance with chewing or any other behavior problem; 603-772-2921
Ext. 112

