

Destructive Chewing

Puppy teething doesn't surprise most families, although just how *much* puppies use their teeth may. Human babies have hands, so they use hands and mouths for necessary learning and exploring as their brains develop. Canine babies must do this exploration mostly with their mouths.

Puppy teeth are quite sharp, and the sharp tips become somewhat smoother through teething/chewing. When the permanent teeth emerge, they are not as sharp. At this point the pup may be housetrained, and early teething has largely subsided. Whatever confinement the family was using to keep the pup out of trouble, they may decide to discontinue. Then it happens.

What Nobody Told You

The *real* chewing comes after the dog has cut the permanent teeth. These teeth seem to require "setting" in the jaw by hard chewing. Dogs who don't do this chewing may have poorer lifelong dental health. But, the dogs who proceed to firmly set their shiny new teeth with robust chewing may have horrified families!

This completely normal stage of dog development is more pronounced in some breeds than others, and in some individual dogs than others. It can be greatly aggravated by anxiety, including separation anxiety, but some dogs who are simply going through the destructive chewing stage are diagnosed with separation anxiety.

To complicate the situation, you can *give* your dog separation anxiety by 1) coming home when you've imprudently left your dog with access to toothsome possessions of yours, 2) seeing a mess, and 3) freaking out at the dog. Do this enough times, and any dog will develop anxiety. Some dogs will develop anxiety if you do it just once. You think, using human logic, that the dog full well knows why you had that conniption fit at the sight of your sofa in pieces. The dog, on the other hand, has no earthly idea why you got mad.

Naturally, the next time you're gone and leave the dog with access to tempting toothables, the physical urging (it may even be pain) in the dog's jaws will result in another chewing episode. After all, the dog is not able to make a mental connection between chewing stuff at 2 p.m. and you getting angry at 5:30 p.m. You come home to the mess, and your human logic interprets this as deliberate defiance.

You act like a human, and the dog acts like a dog. Most dogs will submit to your anger the first few times, until your not accepting the submission and insisting on punishing the dog anyway results in the dog feeling cornered. Then all bets are off as to how the dog might react. You can ruin the dog's temperament.

Other dogs, not so submissive, will see your anger-completely unexplainable from the dog's point of view-and react in a defensive manner. Either way, there are no winners here, only losers. The dog may ultimately lose his or her life, since destructive chewing is a major cause of people giving up their dogs. Often the first step is to put the dog outdoors to live. This can weaken the family's bond with the dog and also introduce new issues, such as barking that disturbs neighbors and brings authorities to your door.

How to Fix It

Dogs need chew toys of good quality that are safe for the chewing habits of each particular dog. It takes observation to determine which toys are okay for which dogs. Provide the dog with a variety of textures, so that whatever the teeth are screaming for at any given moment, the dog can locate a toy-within reach-that will fill the need.

When you're not able to supervise the dog, provide a safe area for the dog to rest. A crate, a comfortable dog run and a room in the house with a baby gate (or two, one stacked above the other to provide adequate height) are all possibilities that work for some dogs. Avoid putting the dog behind a closed door in a room, since this often leads to the dog developing habits such as clawing up doors or the flooring at the bases of doors. Baby gates that allow the dog to see through the doorway tend to avoid these complications.

The destructive chewing stage can last for quite some time, but in most cases will end by the time the dog is 2 years old or so. If you do an excellent job of directing a puppy to appropriate toys using the instructions below, some dogs will be focused on their toys by the time they're a year old and able to have more house freedom. If you've waited until a destructive chewing problem has emerged and are now starting to deal with it in a dog several months of age, plan on restricting house freedom until the dog is a bit older.

Either way, don't just give up and toss the dog outside because you don't want to use a crate or other confinement forever. Rarely does it need to be forever, unless you have a situation that requires confinement for other reasons. Destructive chewing is a stage that, with your help, the majority of dogs can come through very well.

Another tool you need for this training is a bottle of Bitter Apple spray or similar product. Bitter Apple has been around for a long time, doesn't harm dogs if they ingest it, and doesn't stain most surfaces. It's also readily available. This is a training tool, not a protect-the-house tool. Alcohol-based, the spray evaporates quickly and has to be applied three to four times a day to keep its bittering effect active.

Let's look at a teachable moment. You are in the same room with your dog, perhaps watching television or reading a book. A few good dog toys are within easy reach on the floor. The Bitter Apple spray is also handy. The dog, exploring, starts to chew (or any movement showing intention to chew) an inappropriate object.

You get up. Take along the Bitter Apple spray and a dog toy as you calmly go to the dog. Spray the OBJECT the dog is chewing (do not spray the dog), while you calmly say, "Leave it." *Instantly* animate the dog toy and get the dog excited enough to want it. Do not carry this to extreme teasing-it's not a game. Your goal is simply to direct the dog's attention to the toy, not to agitate the dog into a state of high activity. You want the dog to continue thinking of chewing, which dogs do when relaxing.

As soon as the dog wants the toy, give it to the dog. When the dog settles with it to chew, softly praise the dog and withdraw, back to what you were doing before. You've completed a successful lesson.

You will need to repeat this many, many times. You're helping your dog form strong chewing habits of choosing a dog toy every time. A young dog with jaws urging "Chew! Chew! Chew!" is apt to make many mistakes. You actually want these mistakes made in front of you-you do not want to scare the dog into hiding from you to chew.

The longer the dog was allowed to keep making mistakes about chewing before the human family wised up and started this training, the more habits there will be to overcome. Additionally, the dog needs time to mature. Your patience will pay off. Your dog is learning a lot of other good things in the process of this training, including the fact that you're smart and a good person.

If you notice the dog going back to an inappropriate item of a certain texture unlike the dog's toys, by all means get some toys of that texture. This may be a texture your dog's teeth need at that point in development. Don't use discarded human items for toys. It's not fair to expect a dog to consistently know the difference between old shoes and new shoes! Use dog toys.

During the most rampant chewing stage, it pays to bring in new and interesting toys frequently. Some people rotate the toys to keep them interesting. Just remember to keep an assortment of textures available to the dog at all times. This will likely mean you have some toys in every room where you and the dog spend time.

If you find something your dog has chewed and damaged when you weren't watching, it's okay to do the training maneuver (*calmly*) if the dog is still chewing it. If the dog is done chewing it, you've missed your chance. There is nothing you can teach your dog about destructive chewing by punishing the dog. Your best bet is simply to do a better job with confinement and supervision, so that the dog is not again put into a position to make this mistake without your help to choose the right toy.

You're helping your dog form habits for life. Not only do you want the dog to chew dog toys instead of your things, you also want your dog to form the chewing habit! Yes, that's right! The dog who continues to chew on appropriate toys through life will typically have better dental health. If you've ever had a dog with teeth that quickly got dirty and infected and had to have a lot of dental work, you'll realize that you want a dog who chews. Of course, you want the dog to chew the right toys!