

Dealing With Normal Puppy Behavior

Chewing



Whoever thought that raising a child is the toughest thing to do may not have raised a puppy. After all, at least babies can wear diapers! Much like infants and toddlers, though, puppies explore their world by putting things in their mouths. Puppies are teething until they're about six months old, which usually creates some discomfort. Chewing not only facilitates teething, but also makes sore gums feel better.

Puppies may chew on furniture, shoes, shrubbery, and other objects. These are normal puppy behaviors, but they can still create problems for you. Unfortunately, unlike children, puppies won't magically "outgrow" these behaviors as they mature. Instead, you must shape your puppy's behaviors and teach him which ones are acceptable and which aren't.

Discouraging Unacceptable Behaviors

It's virtually inevitable that your puppy will, at some point, chew up something you value. This is part of raising a puppy! You can, however, prevent most problems by taking the following precautions.

- Minimize chewing problems by puppy-proofing your house. Put the trash out of reach—inside a cabinet or outside on the porch—or buy containers with locking lids. Encourage children to pick up their toys and don't leave socks, shoes, eyeglasses, briefcases, or TV remote controls lying around within your puppy's reach.
- If, and only if, you catch your puppy chewing on something he shouldn't, interrupt the behavior with a loud noise, then offer him an acceptable chew toy instead. Praise him lavishly when he takes the toy in his mouth.
- Make unacceptable chew items unpleasant to your puppy. Furniture and other items can be coated with a taste deterrent (such as Bitter Apple®) to make them unappealing. (See "Using Aversives to Modify Your Dog's Behavior.")
- Don't give your puppy objects to play with—such as old socks, old shoes, or old children's toys—that closely resemble items that are off-limits. Puppies can't tell the difference.

- Closely supervise your puppy. Don't give him the chance to go off by himself and get into trouble. Use baby gates, close doors, or tether him to you with a six-foot leash so that you can keep an eye on him.
- When you must be gone from your home or you can't actively supervise your puppy, confine him to a small, safe area such as a laundry room. You might also consider crate training your puppy. (See "Crate Training Your Dog.") Puppies under six months of age shouldn't be crated for longer than three or four hours at a time because they may not be able to control their bladders and bowels longer than that.
- Make sure your puppy is getting adequate physical activity. Puppies (and dogs) left alone in a yard don't play by themselves. Take your puppy for walks or play a game of fetch with him for both mental and physical exercise.
- Give your puppy plenty of "people time." He can only learn the rules of your home when he's with you.

Encouraging Acceptable Behavior

- Provide your puppy with lots of appropriate toys. (See "Dog Toys and How to Use Them.")
- Rotate your puppy's toys. Puppies are often more interested in unfamiliar or novel objects. Put out a few for several days, then pick those up and put out different ones.
- Experiment with different kinds of toys. When you introduce a new toy to your puppy, watch him to make sure he won't tear it up and ingest the pieces.

- Consider the various types of toys that can be stuffed with food. Putting tidbits of food inside chew toys focuses your puppy's chewing activities on those toys instead of on unacceptable objects.
- If your puppy is teething, try freezing a wet washcloth for him to chew on.

Other Reasons for Destructive Behavior

In most cases, destructive chewing by puppies is nothing more than normal puppy behavior. Occasionally, however, puppies—like adult dogs—can exhibit destructive behaviors for specific reasons. Examples include separation anxiety, fear-related behaviors, and attention-getting behaviors. For help with these problems, contact a professional animal behaviorist.

What Not to Do

Never discipline or punish your puppy after the fact. If you discover a chewed item even minutes after he's chewed it, you're too late. Animals associate correction with what they're doing at the time they're being corrected. A puppy can't reason that, "I tore up those shoes an hour ago and that's why I'm being scolded now." Some people believe this is what a puppy is thinking because he runs and hides or because he "looks guilty."

In reality, "guilty looks" are actually canine submissive postures that dogs show when they're threatened. When you're angry and upset, your puppy feels threatened by your tone of voice, body postures, and facial expressions, so he may hide or show submissive postures. Punishment after the fact will not only fail to eliminate the undesirable behavior, but could provoke other undesirable behaviors as well.

A puppy has a lot to learn in his new home. Be patient and consistent when training your new puppy and you'll share a special bond for years to come.