



Destructive Behavior in Dogs

Solutions for Preventing and Eliminating Destructive Behaviors

It is normal for dogs to explore the world with their mouths. However, dogs may not choose the safest or most appropriate chewing items as they get used to their space. Until Rover has learned what she can and cannot chew, the situation must be managed as much as possible, so she doesn't have the opportunity to chew on unacceptable objects. The more practice she gets chewing the things we don't want to be chewed, the harder it can be to curb the behavior. It's best to understand that at some point, Rover will chew something that we find valuable or that she is not supposed to chew, it's inevitable. Just because we can expect it, doesn't mean we shouldn't prevent it. If we are meeting her needs for enrichment and exercise and making it near impossible for her to practice chewing things that are not designated for her, we're unlikely to run into issues of destruction.

Without realizing it, often times people pay more attention to their dogs more when the dog is misbehaving. Dogs who don't realize that it's easier to gain attention and reinforcement for inappropriate behaviors may engage in destructive behavior when their owners are present as a way to attract attention; even if the attention is negative, such as a verbal scolding. From a dog's point of view, negative attention may be better than no attention at all.

Chewing is a normal teething and investigative puppy behavior, but it is also a tool our dogs will use throughout their lifetime to self-soothe and relieve stress. It will happen less frequently as our dogs age, but will always remain a stress relieving behavior. Some dogs are more prone to chewing than others, similar to how some humans may be more prone to chewing their nails or frequently needing an oral outlet like chewing gum to help relieve anxious energy. Since we know chewing is a way our dogs relieve stress, make sure to offer appropriate chew items to promote appropriate chewing. If many items are already accessible and the dog is still choosing to chew inappropriate items, we may need to reassess our dog's needs or the management that is being utilized to prevent it.

Prevention is the Best Medicine

It's our responsibility to set our dogs up for success. Which means it's on us to make our homes "Dog Safe". Meaning, if the item isn't acceptable for Rover's mouth, don't make it available. Keep clothing, shoes, books, trash, eyeglasses, cell phones and remote controls out of Rover's reach. Regularly take a lap throughout the house, look and see what is easily accessible to Rover. Check countertops, floor level shelves and items placed on the ground. If there is anything within reach that might entice Rover to chew, pick it up and put it out of reach. It may be helpful to make sure there are storage bins or

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shelves to help encourage children to put items away. Many children's toys closely resemble pet toys or make delightful substitutes when they're found lying around. Be careful not to confuse Rover by offering her shoes and socks as toys and then expect her to be able to distinguish the difference. Rover's toys should be obviously different from household items. If there are a lot of plush toys in the home for the kids, it may be better not to choose plush toys for Rover.

Until Rover learns the rules of the house, confine her in a crate or safe space when unable to keep an eye on her. Be sure to choose a safe place, which has been dog proofed with access to fresh water and safe toys. Make Rover's favorite off-limits chewing objects unattractive or unavailable to her. Close off areas to the home where she has been seen chewing, or attempting to chew, objects that cannot be moved, like furniture. This can mean keeping doors closed or even setting up a barrier, like a baby gate, to close off access to a section of the home. This can be helpful for training the tiny humans of the household too; if all their toys live upstairs and Rover lives downstairs, there's less of a chance that their toys become hers.

It's best to focus our energy on the behaviors we want our dogs to do. If you see Rover snooping around the room, looking for an activity, point out a toy for her to engage with. If she's into something she shouldn't be, let's call her away, remove access to that item and redirect her attention to an appropriate item. We want our dogs to get more attention for doing the right things than to have dogs who are misbehaving for attention, or needing to constantly have to tell them what not to do. By coaching them on appropriate behaviors, we're building independent, well-behaved pups!

What About When They Have the Item?

If Rover is caught chewing on something she shouldn't, interrupt the behavior by calling her away or making an exciting noise to distract her. Once you've gotten them to pause the behavior, you can offer her an acceptable chew toy instead. If there is not an easily accessible item to trade, encourage her to follow you away to find one. Praise Rover lavishly when she takes the toy in her mouth, then remove the item that she is not allowed to have. Remove it from the space and dry it off; if her saliva is still present when it's returned, it will likely encourage more chewing- since it now smells like a toy.

A helpful behavior to have on cue, is "drop it". This way, if and when she picks up an off-limits object, the cue can be used and praise provided for complying. The best way to teach "drop it" is to practice having Rover exchange a toy in her possession for a tidbit of food. As she is holding the object, give the cue and place the food near the item, she's likely to spit one out for the other. Once she spits out the item, give her the treat. It's best to practice this behavior while playing games. Specifically a game where the item you're asking her to drop, is one that she can have back. Toss the toy, give the cue and trade toy for treat. Then toss the toy again. By turning this into a game, you'll get more opportunities to reinforce the new cue. You can also play this game using two toys. If the cue of "drop it" is only ever

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used to take away the fun item or end the game, it may build a negative association – so keep the cue fresh and positive by using it often with items they can keep engaging with and practicing to trade inappropriate items for appropriate items. If you're noticing a pattern where you seem to be trading frequently, assess how your management is going. It may be that your dog still has too much access to inappropriate items, or that your dog needs a bit of attention. If you think it's the latter, it may be a good time to set your dog up in their confinement space or offer them something that might keep their attention for longer, like a stuffed KONG.

How to Keep Your Sanity (and Keep Your House in One Piece)

Rover needs plenty of enrichment to help keep her on the straight and narrow. Enrichment means access to perform species normal behaviors. In more direct terms, she needs to be able to practice doggy things. Some basic doggy needs are eating, playing, interacting with people and other animals, and practicing hunting and scavenging; which really just means using their noses to find delicious goodies! Sometimes we pet guardians forget that dogs are built to use their brains and bodies. Here are a few things you can do to help Rover relieve her energy in an appropriate way that will help keep the house in one piece and the whole family happy, Rover included.

- Play with Rover daily in a safe, fenced-in area, allowing for her to stretch her legs and get in some cardio. If no yard is available, you might find a local tennis court or other fenced area.
 - Fetch is a great game that will use up Rover's excess energy quickly.
 - If your dog has a strong chase drive, try teaching her how to use a Flirt Pole, it's like a giant cat toy that allows your dog to practice chasing, even if you're in a tight space.
- Go for more walks. Walks should be more than just bathroom time. On-leash walks are important opportunities to be together with Rover, but more than anything they allow for her to sniff, explore and burn off some energy. Be sure to practice some training while you're out there, for added benefits of focus and exercise.
- Increase Rover's opportunities for mental stimulation. Teach her a few cues and/or tricks, practice daily, and provide her with puzzle toys to help her burn some brain calories.
- Consider the various types of toys which can be stuffed with food. Putting tidbits of food inside chew toys focuses Rover's chewing activities on these toys instead of on unacceptable objects. Kong's, Buster Cubes, Tug-A-Jug, Kibble Nibble are all types of food dispensing toys. A Kong can be filled with kibble mixed with wet food and sealed up with peanut butter. For an added challenge, place the item in the freezer overnight. Alternatively feed Rover her entire meal from one of the other types of toys. These options will make meal time last for an hour or even two.
- Try different kinds of toys. When introducing a new toy, watch Rover to make sure she doesn't tear it up and ingest the pieces. Shredding toys is far more appropriate than shredding household items, so if shredding is your pup's favorite way to play – try offering fun and appropriate options for your pup to shred. This is a great way to reuse your recycle!

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Newspapers stuffed with kibble and put in a cardboard box offer a great option for your dog to shred as well as use their nose and brain to solve their food puzzle.

- Provide Rover with lots of toys. Pick out toys that she prefers and allow her access to multiple items at a time. You'll also want to rotate Rover's toys to refresh her interest. New toys are always more interesting than old ones. If you have a batch of hidden toys, you can rotate those with the toys she currently has to keep things exciting. There's no need to buy new toys each week.
- If your pup really enjoys playing with other dogs, consider a good doggie day care program or group hiking for two or three days a week to work off some of Rover's excess energy.

Important Things to Remember

We want to teach Rover what we want her to do, rather than providing her with a lot of “no, not that” feedback. If we can help her get the right answer more quickly, we can keep more of our own items intact and continue to build a strong relationship. If we're constantly at odds with our dogs, we're frustrated, they're frustrated and nobody's happy. Work to set up your space so the environment does all the work. If it's easy for Rover to stay successful, there's a big chance she won't ever revert to those old habits. If you've tried setting up the environment and you've tried confining Rover but you're still having issues with specific items, commercial “anti-chew” products are available to discourage Rover from chewing off-limits items. These products are sprayed on the items, creating a bitter taste that will not harm Rover. However, be sure that this is only used in conjunction with managing the space and providing a lot of appropriate items. It's always best to start with management and coaching Rover to make the right choices, these types of aversive sprays should really only be necessary after the above mentioned options have already been utilized for a significant period of time. You may also want to consider reaching out to a trainer who can help take a look at your management and set up, as well as make suggestions for your dog's exercise or enrichment routine. Often times having a fresh set, of experienced eyes, will show us that we haven't tried everything and that we may not need to use those commercially available aversive tools at all.

Destructive behaviors are most likely a misuse of a dog's excess energy, especially while they're transitioning into a new home environment. However, they can be indicative of more severe stress. If these destructive behaviors are persistent after training and prevention methods, if your pup is not eating or drinking, and/or is regularly eliminating in their space while you are gone or away; your dog may be in severe stress and it would be best to speak with your veterinarian, who may refer you to a Board Certified Veterinary Behaviorist to help find the best solution.

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There are a wide group of trainers who specialize in working through Separation Anxiety Related Behaviors and may be able to help you determine if you're dealing with anxiety related behaviors or boredom related behaviors.

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