

Homeless Pets Foundation



DESTRUCTIVE BEHAVIOR

It is normal for dogs to explore the world with their mouths. However, chewing can be directed onto appropriate items so Rover isn't destroying items of value. 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.

Taking Control by Managing the Situation

- Take responsibility for personal belongings. 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.
- Don't 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 goods.
- Until Rover learns the rules of the house, confine her when unable to keep an eye on her. Choose a safe place which is dog proof with fresh water and safe toys. If Rover is crate trained, crate her for short periods of time.
- Give Rover plenty of people time. Rover won't know how to behave if she isn't taught alternatives to inappropriate behavior and these can't be learned when in the yard alone.
- Take Rover to an obedience class to teach her important commands, like "leave it." Classes may have the added benefit of reducing destructive behavior because they will help Rover burn off excess energy. To register for ARF U training classes, call 925.296.3111.
- If, and only if, Rover is caught chewing on something she shouldn't, interrupt the behavior with a loud noise and offer her an acceptable chew toy instead. Praise Rover lavishly when she takes the toy in her mouth.
- Have realistic expectations. It is virtually inevitable that Rover will, at some point, chew up something of value. This is often part of the transition to a new home. Chewing is normal teething and investigative puppy behavior. However, dogs will engage in destructive behavior for a variety of reasons. In order to deal with the behavior, it must first be determined why Rover is being destructive.

Play, Boredom and/or Social Isolation

Normal play behavior can result in destruction, as it may involve digging, chewing, shredding and/or shaking toy-like objects. Since dogs investigate objects by pawing at

them and exploring them with their mouths, they may inadvertently damage items in their environment. Rover may be chewing for entertainment if:

- She's left alone for long time periods without opportunities for interaction with family members.
- Her environment is relatively barren, without playmates or toys.
- She's a puppy or adolescent (under 3 years old) and doesn't have other outlets for her energy.
- She's a particularly active type of dog (like the herding or sporting breeds) which needs an active lifestyle to be happy.

Solutions

- Play with Rover daily in a safe, fenced-in area. If no yard is available, a tennis court is a good place to play. Fetch is a great game that will use up Rover's excess energy quickly.
- Go for a walk. Walks should be more than just bathroom time. On-leash walks are important opportunities to be together with Rover. Don't forget to allow time for sniffing, exploring, instruction and praise.
- Increase Rover's opportunities for mental stimulation. Teach her a few cues and/or tricks and practice daily. If the time is available, take an obedience class at ARF U.
- Provide Rover with lots of toys.
- Rotate Rover's toys to refresh her interest. New toys are always more interesting than old ones.
- Try different kinds of toys, but when introducing a new toy, watch Rover to make sure she doesn't tear it up and ingest the pieces.
- 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.
- 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.
- Consider a good doggie day care program for two or three days a week to work off some of Rover's excess energy.

Attention-Seeking Behavior

Without realizing it, often times people pay more attention to their dogs more when the dog is misbehaving. Dogs who don't receive much attention and reinforcement for appropriate behavior 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 is better than no attention at all.

Solutions

- Make sure Rover receives plenty of positive attention every day – playing, walking, grooming or just petting.
- Ignore (as much as possible) bad behavior and reward only good behavior. Remember to reward Rover with praise and petting when she's playing quietly with appropriate toys.
- Make Rover's favorite off-limits chew objects unattractive or unavailable to her. Use aversives on objects which cannot be hidden.
- Teach Rover a "drop it" command so when she picks up an off-limits object, the command 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.
- Practice "Say Please" with Rover. This places Rover in the habit of complying with cues and is a good way to make sure she receives lots of positive attention for doing the right things – so she won't have to resort to being naughty just to receive attention.

What Not To Do

Punishment is rarely effective in resolving destructive behavior problems and can even make matters worse. Never discipline Rover after-the-fact. If an item is discovered to be chewed by Rover even after just a few minutes later, it's too late to administer a correction. Rover doesn't understand that, "I chewed those shoes an hour ago and that's why I'm being scolded now." People often believe their dog makes this connection because she runs and hides or looks guilty. Dogs don't feel guilt; rather they display submissive postures like cowering, running away or hiding, when they feel threatened by an angry tone of voice, body posture or facial expression. Rover doesn't understand that she's done something wrong; she only knows when her guardian is upset. Punishment after-the-fact will not only fail to eliminate the undesirable behavior, but may also provoke other undesirable behaviors.