

Behavior FAQ: Destructive Behavior

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Probably nothing is more frustrating than when your dog tears up, chews up or in some way damages your belongings. Having lost everything from irreplaceable old family pictures to hundreds of dollars of new plants, we appreciate your frustration. But having a dog means you will inevitably lose an item you care about to your dog's teeth or paws. And although on any given day, any dog can turn anything into a chew toy, your dog shouldn't be routinely destructive.

First off, take a deep breath and try not to be mad at your dog. Never try to discipline your dog after the fact by showing him what he did. Your dog won't understand punishment after the fact and this will damage your relationship and can even cause your dog to become defensively aggressive. You wouldn't punish your dog after you came home if your neighbor told you he'd been barking all day, because it's obvious your dog can't connect the punishment to the barking. The same is true for destructive behavior. Dogs cannot connect the *evidence* of misbehavior with the behavior itself.

Your dog isn't being destructive because she's mad at you, to teach you a lesson or to show you she's boss. There are many reasons for destructive behavior, but spite and revenge aren't included.

Separation anxiety is a common cause but it is not the only cause of destructive behavior that occurs only when your dog is home alone. Your dog may also be bored or may be frightened by noises or other events. Dogs are opportunists. Your dog may never get in the trash or counter surf when you are home, because he knows he'll be scolded. But these are intensely self-rewarding behaviors when your dog is by himself, because the end result is finding interesting tidbits—and nothing bad happens at all! Your dog has simply learned to tell when he will be punished and when he won't. So not all home-alone problems are due to separation anxiety.

Be very, very cautious about crating your dog to manage destructive behavior. If the destructiveness is due to separation anxiety, thunder phobia or other fear-related problems, confining your dog will only increase her panic and will likely result in her hurting herself trying to get out of the crate. If you try this option, you absolutely must gradually acclimate your dog to the crate and to being alone in it.

If your dog is also destructive when you are home, it's likely he's just amusing himself. Chewing is an enjoyable activity for dogs. Puppies and young dogs need to chew because they are teething and are exploring and learning about their world. Inadvertent destructiveness can also be part of normal play behavior. Meeting your dog's behavioral needs for play, chewing, exercise and mental stimulation can go a long way toward preventing destructiveness. Providing your dog with wonderful, engaging toys to occupy him can help redirect his behavior, rather than having him use your sofa as a chew toy or digging holes to amuse himself.

FIND A BEHAVIOR CONSULTANT TO HELP

Many problems are easily corrected through modification training, particularly if problems are addressed early. Find an animal behavior consultant in your area through one of the following Web sites: [American College of Veterinary Behaviorists](#), [International Association of Animal Behavior Consultants](#) or [Animal Behavior Society](#). Learn more by reading “Guidelines for Choosing a Trainer or Behavior Consultant.”