

Take it-Leave It

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In order to solve problem behaviors, we need to question why they are occurring. We need to “play detective” to resolve the behavior problem. What do you do if your new puppy is chewing your house to pieces? Dogs explore the world with their mouths. It’s normal canine behavior. We just need to teach them what objects are acceptable to chew. In addition to exploration, puppies chew because they are teething. From about five months to seven months old, their adult teeth are coming in. They have sore gums throughout puppyhood, and chewing helps relieve the pain. Dogs also chew out of boredom, to get attention, or even out of habit.

When training, correction is only part of the answer. We must also show the pup what is acceptable behavior. In order to prevent a puppy from chewing your favorite couch, you must carefully supervise and not allow it to have too much freedom too soon. Confine the pup to a safe, puppy-proofed area when you cannot observe it. Make sure that all hazardous objects are out of reach. An exercise pen or crate purchased at a pet store can save both your sanity and your pup’s life.

Correct only when you observe the pup chewing an unwanted object, not after the fact. If a pup already has grabbed a forbidden object such as a shoe, don’t play a game of chase. Teach the “give” command before you need to use it in the heat of the moment. Hold a toy and tell the pup to “take it.” Keep holding onto the toy and, showing a visible treat with your other hand, tell the pup “give.” Praise profusely when the pup releases the item. Praise with “Good give!” Do this as a separate training exercise before you need it, so that your pup will be reliable in the command. This exercise will also make games of fetch with your dog enjoyable, rather than turning into a tug of war.

As much as possible while the pup is learning, have all family members pick up personal items so that the pup doesn’t face such temptation. Also, be sure not to give the pup old socks or shoes as chew toys. He can’t differentiate between those and your new loafers that you wore a few times and will be very confused. He will be drawn to items with your scent.

You can also teach the pup to “leave it” before he touches your prized possession. Have your pup on a leash and have an assistant place a large, visible treat about 10 feet away. As your pup moves toward the treat, give the command “leave it.” If he tugs, ignore it. The split second that the pup releases the tension on the leash, give it a small treat and praise, saying “Yes! Good leave it!” in a happy tone. Timing is very important. As with the “give” exercise, repeat a few times, ending on a successful note. He can never reach the treat or the

lesson is lost. Have the assistant pick up the treat before you let the pup off the leash. In addition to helping prevent unwanted chewing, this exercise helps your dog learn to not pick up and/or eat unwanted objects on the ground. You can also use this exercise as your pup attempts to take something off your coffee table. Until he knows what "leave it" means, use the sound "eh-eh" as the pup goes toward a forbidden object in order to briefly interrupt him. Then give him an acceptable, safe chew.

Chew deterrents can also be purchased from pet stores. They have a bitter taste and discourage chewing. Make sure you read the labels carefully and test them on an inconspicuous place before using them.

The correction and training discussed above are only half of the puzzle. You must also redirect the dog to acceptable items to chew. The pup is going to chew: you just want him to chew the correct things. There are many safe chew toys you can purchase at pet stores, such as a Kong™ or Nylabone.™ Make sure that the chew toy is large enough for your pup so that it can't get caught the pup's mouth or throat. You can even put a little cheese or peanut butter around the inside rim of the Kong™, and even freeze it first, for more interest. Praise by saying "good chew" when the pup's gnawing on the safe item.

If your pup is chewing out of boredom or a lack of exercise, increase its mental and physical stimulation. Take it for more walks, play more games. Obedience training is also crucial. In addition to having a companion you can live with, obedience training will tire out your dog mentally. The old saying that "a tired dog is a good dog" is so true! Also, make sure that your pup is given enough positive attention so that he won't solicit it by being destructive. Happy training and safe chewing!