

Homeward Bound Golden Retriever Rescue

Golden Rule Training

Stopping Destructive Behavior in Dogs

Destructive behavior in dogs is not a normal state of being and it's likely to happen when an adult dog becomes bored or lacks adequate exercise. Such dogs are likely to develop nervous or frustrated tendencies, much the same as humans bite their finger nails and an under-stimulated dog will often resort to chewing, digging, and repetitive behaviors. It's important he gets adequate exercise and play every day, it is equally important to provide obedience training to encourage discipline, exercise and affection all in combination.

Understanding the Behavior

Understand what triggers the destructive behavior in you dog. While what is destructive may depend on what you value and what your dog has been doing, not all behaviors that destroy human items are driven by intent to destroy! While puppies can be destructive, their destructive play is about exploring, not about intentionally destroying things.



Abnormal behaviors in a pet dog include aggression, anxiety, displacement activities, trying to dominate you, fear and phobias, frustration, and stereotypical behaviors such as repeated activity with little purpose. Aside from aggressive behaviors, the most common problems that can be viewed as destructive include:

Over-activity or hyperactivity: The dog is always full of energy and always active (note that true hyperactivity is rare in dogs).

Separation anxiety: The dog panics once left alone and might bark, pace, eliminate in inappropriate places, and destroy walls, doors, etc., in an attempt to get back to an owner. *Note: more information below*

Attention-seeking behavior: The dog might bark or jump up to get attention, and may do other things to get the owner's attention. We often inadvertently reward this behavior by yelling or scolding; this in turn is attention, so we are reinforcing the dog's attention-seeking behavior!



Noise phobia: The dog might respond with fear to such loud noises as thunder or fireworks by destroying doors, walls, or objects, in order to try and hide. This is a heightened anxiety response to something that is overwhelming to them.

Note: See the Desensitization article in the training library.

Boredom: Boredom is the main cause of many a problem behavior, as the dog seeks an outlet to relieve its frustration and lack of attention. Digging can be the outcome of boredom. See more information below.

The Steps That Will Help the Situation

The key is exercise, exercise, exercise!

Walk your dog regularly. If you have slipped in maintaining a walking routine with your dog, reinstate it. If you haven't yet developed a routine, start now. And if you're not free to walk your dog regularly, find somebody who can. Go for regular walks and try to include a variety of exercise options during the walk, some examples are:

Take your dog on a walk in an area that is challenging. Try anywhere that has hills or an incline. Allow him to take breaks once in a while and bring along water for him to drink as needed (throw in your own water bottle, too!). Your dog may get in the habit of using the same trail, so switch it up to challenge him and keep him from getting bored, for example:

Visit a beach that allows dogs. The sand is excellent exercise for the dog's muscles, and the sea offers a fabulous opportunity for swimming and fetching all manner of items you can toss to your dog. If you don't want to take a ball, use the beach flotsam to play fetch with your pooch.

Vary the parks you're visiting to walk your dog. Find out which parks allow dogs and vary your schedule each week to visit different ones. This will be stimulating for both of you, as you see new sights and explore new places.

Play with your dog more. Besides walking, play is an important part of your dog's interaction with you.

Play catch in the backyard for 15 minutes a day. Try doing this in the morning, when you're alert and your dog is usually very hyper. You'll notice that he'll have less energy throughout the day if you drain him of it earlier on!

Make a meet-up time for doggy friends. Find out which of your friends own dogs and plan meet-ups in central locations where your dogs can play together. Naturally, you'll also need to learn in advance if they get along with each other!

Use a ball or a Frisbee and help your dog learn to play catch and fetch! It's fun, great exercise and a great way to bond with your dog!

Additional Things to Consider

Avoid overcrowding your dog. If he feels overcrowded, either by living in a confined space or being forced to share his space with other dogs without having space of his own, abnormal behaviors can arise. In particular, male dogs will fight over territory if they feel crowded.

Ensure that your dog is fenced in well. Poor fencing that allows your dog to slip out can result in destructive behaviors including car chasing, fighting with other dogs, and potentially attacking people. In many jurisdictions, you are required by law to ensure that your dog is properly restrained and you'll be held liable for your dog's bad behavior.

Remove chaos from your dog's life. Just as children, many dogs need a routine. When you change routine or provide none, it can distress a dog considerably. A schedule for feeding and walks at regular times helps avoid anxiety. Try to always feed in the same place and take walks at the same time.

Provide your dog with a calm and peaceful environment. Your dog is more likely to be annoying and overactive if she's already in a chaotic environment. Turn the television down lower and close any doors where sound can impact her negatively.

Do Not leave your dog in a kennel for more than 4 hours! The kennel or crate creates isolation and causes her to feel less loved. In turn, the dog will become more frantic trying to get your attention. If you do use a kennel, make sure the kennel is large enough for the dog to stand up and turn around. Before kenneling, make sure you spend plenty of time with your dog exercising, playing, and giving her attention.

Teach your dog to heel. The closer your dog is when he walks with you, the more he'll know that you're the one who has the authority and is in control. Don't let him walk behind you or ahead of you, but always right by your side. This lets him know you're in authority and he must submit (see our training library for leash skills).

Change the way you greet your dog when you come home. It's normal for dogs to become overly excited when you get home. She will wag her tail, jump around and sometimes bark. To calm her overactive state, ignore her when you walk in and give her 5 minutes to calm down. Then greet your dog to say, "Hello." This will help stop her hyper behavior and will let her know you don't approve. After a few weeks of practicing this, you will notice she is excited to see you but in a more clam manner.

Entertain your dog while you're away. The most common time of the day that your dog is likely to be destructive is when you're away at work or out doing things away from the house. Your dog can feel lonely, isolated and anxious. Be sure to give your dog plenty of attention, playing a game of catch, or taking him on a walk before leaving the house. When you're getting ready to go somewhere, leave a safe toy with your dog; this will distract him while giving him something to do.

Don't always have the same old toys out. If your dog is always playing with the ten toys you bought him, then he'll get tired of them and unimpressed when you leave. Make sure you hide all of his toys in a closet and only allow two or three to be out at a time. When you switch the toys around, your dog will be entertained more and he'll think it's a treat when he gets an old toy to play with that's been hidden away. As an added incentive, this will prevent you from spending more money on new toys whenever you're planning on leaving for a long period of time!

Toys and Play:

Look for new toys that stimulate your pet's interest. Make sure each toy has lots of "give," so your pet can chew to his teeth's content without shredding it. Beware of bells, buttons and squeakers that may come loose; your pet may swallow them and choke. Some toys can be filled with kibble that falls out as your pet plays. Agility training equipment combines exercise with fun to create a constructive outlet for your pet's energy.



Deterrents

Bitter sprays and salves applied to furniture edges help deter chewing. Motion- and touch-sensitive warning systems keep pets away from family belongings. If your dog is chewing window ledges or door frames, try a citronella deterrent made especially for this situation (sold by In the Company of Dogs on line).

Obedience Training

Just 5 to 15 minutes of training a day can make a big difference. For young, immature and hyperactive puppies that have difficulty concentrating during lengthy obedience lessons, even a few 30-second obedience training "mini-sessions" offered on a daily basis will prove very helpful. Remember to remain upbeat throughout, and always end your sessions on positive note!

Doggy Day Care

There are so many day care options for your dog what you can use while at work; this is a great option for dog-friendly dogs. They get exercise and socialization which is critical for a well-balanced and happy dog.

Digging Behavior

Digging is a common behavior because dogs enjoy it! However, it is certainly aggravated by boredom or excess energy. The key to dealing with digging successfully is to find the motivation and deflect it as best you can. Any of the approaches alone or in combination might ease the digging behavior.

If your dog is digging because she is bored, increase the play and exercise activities. Don't leave her alone in the yard all day.

If your dog is digging because she appears to making herself a nice, cool, soft place to sleep on, create a shaded area for her, with something comfortable and cool to lie on.

Give her some digging space or a digging pit where she can dig without destroying your garden. Create the space and bury some goodies in it that she'll love finding. Burying items close to the surface at first, then gradually burying them deeper, can help retain her interest in the new digging spot. As time goes on, you can lessen the burying; she should start to treat this digging area as her own. It also helps if you can temporarily block off her old digging space.

Separation Anxiety

Separation anxiety can be another root cause of destructive behavior. Fear or lack of confidence is the reason dogs get anxious. In order to prevent separation anxiety, dogs need to feel happy, secure, and comfortable when you're away. It's important to give them things to do while you're gone. Provide them with lots of toys, such as a Kong stuffed with treats, or a digging pit in the yard. Often another companion pet can help alleviate the boredom.

Another way to prevent separation anxiety is to set aside scheduled time periods to give your dog undivided attention, play and exercise. A happy, well-exercised puppy will usually sleep contentedly during the day while you are gone. Be sure that one of the scheduled play sessions occurs before you must leave for the day. Give your puppy a chance to settle down before you leave and don't make a big deal of your departure, just leave without any emotion or commotion. You may want to leave the radio on for a "white noise" effect (something soothing should do the trick).

If your puppy is already experiencing separation anxiety, then gradually accustom him to your leaving. Practice leaving and returning several times a day until he gets used to your departures and realizes that you are not abandoning him forever. Gradually leave for longer and longer periods of time, but start out by leaving for just 5 minutes and returning again. *Note: see the Golden Rule Training library for more information on separation anxiety.*

Puppies and Destructive Behavior

Don't give your puppy an old shoe or sock to chew on. Puppies don't understand the difference between new and old. Puppies chew on whatever they can get their mouths on for any number of reasons: they are bored, they have a lot of energy, they are teething, or they are just curious. Dogs learn through their mouths. It is their tool; it is how they receive a great deal of information. They are naturally inclined to use their mouths whenever they can.

Fortunately, most destructive chewing behavior can be prevented or controlled. To prevent problem chewing and to direct your pup's natural inclination to chew toward appropriate objects, follow these simple guidelines:

Puppy-proof a confined area: Remove all items your puppy can chew on, including socks, shoes, furniture, plants, etc., from any area in which you confine your puppy. Make sure electrical cords are out of reach.

Confine your pup in a crate, cage, or puppy-proofed area when you are away. Because puppies learn with their mouths, giving your teething puppy free rein in the house is asking for trouble. Keep him confined; you do not want him to go to school on your expensive living room furniture. Make sure to supply the puppy with appropriate chew toys so the puppy has something to do and to teach the puppy what to chew on.

Closely supervise your uncrated pup. You should always be aware of where your uncrated pup is and what he is doing.

Give your puppy chew toys. The sole focus of your dog's chewing should be directed toward items you select. There are a wide range of items from which to choose including many safe, long-lasting chew toys that are made especially for teething puppies that will keep them occupied and content for hours. For example, Kong toys (now available specifically for teething puppies) satisfy your puppy's need for chewing and gum stimulation. The items should not be similar to articles you do not want your puppy to chew. Your puppy can not tell the difference between your new dress shoes and an old tattered pair.

Make departures low key to avoid causing *separation anxiety*, which is often expressed through nonstop barking, whining, or destructive chewing. Before you leave, add your scent to your dog's toy. Rub the bone between your hands and give it to your pup several minutes before you leave. This should keep the puppy occupied so you can leave without a fuss being made.

Give your puppy plenty of exercise to relieve boredom and burn off energy – two significant factors contributing to destructive chewing. An hour of running, walking, and/or swimming twice a day is ideal.

Correct chewing of inappropriate objects. If you catch your puppy in the act of chewing anything but his chew toy, remove the object and replace it with an acceptable chew toy. If your puppy then chews on the toy, praise him. You always want to reinforce desired behavior with praise. If possible, treat the 'inappropriate object' with a product designed to deter chewing, such as Grannick's Bitter Apple or Drs. Foster and Smith Chew Stop that will give it a bad taste.

Teach your puppy to ignore non-toy objects if he consistently chews the wrong things. Place tempting objects on the floor along with your pups chew toy and pretend not to pay any attention to him. If (and usually when) he starts to put his mouth over one of the forbidden objects, correct with a firm 'No!' and point out his bone. Once he learns he can only have the toy when you are in the room, it is time to leave the room for short intervals.

If he chews on forbidden objects after you leave the room, your quick return will catch him in the act; this is the only time when corrective action should be taken. This means taking the object away, say, "no" (no yelling or scolding, you will only make him fearful of you) and replace it with an appropriate dog toy. Again, give him the toy, and praise if it is accepted. If he is chewing forbidden objects but you cannot catch him in the act, he should be crated when unsupervised until he learns what is and is not acceptable to chew on. Make sure to leave several appropriate dog toys accessible at all times. It helps to have a certain location such as a basket that contains the dog's toys where he can go to get one when he wants.

The obvious purpose of this training is to prepare your puppy for the day when he can be trusted to be alone in the house and not confined.

Conclusion

Most young dogs require a lot of exercise; a daily walk is not enough to expend their energy. Planning for a morning game of "fetch" or going for a jog with your dog would be more appropriate. Then after work, your dog will need another round of aerobic exercise. As your dog ages, at least 4 to 5 years old, he will start to slow down and a daily walk or two will work perfectly.

Obedience training is another important factor and a good way to exercise your dog's brain, improve your connection with your dog and, of course, improve his manners.

Sources

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