



Clermont Animal Hospital, Inc

AVOIDING CHEWING CATASTROPHIES

Getting Your Dog To Chew the Right Thing

Canine chewing sprees can be as expensive as they are frustrating. My most expensive case history involved an Akita that meted out \$10,000.00 worth of damage to the interior of a Mercedes in a little under half an hour. In most situations, doggy devastation occurs in the owner's absence, usually when the dog is left home alone.

Frustrated at their inability to correct the dog when it misbehaves, many owners resort to punishing the dog for welcoming their return home. But perhaps there is a better way. Indeed, teaching a dog how to entertain itself and wile away the long hours when left at home alone is one of the most important ingredients of domestic education.

Dogs chew out of necessity, boredom, anxiety or enjoyment. Puppies especially have a strong urge to chew. Not only do they chew to relieve the irritation and inflammation of teething but also, pups characteristically investigate the environment with jaws and paws. Everything is pawed, sniffed, licked or chewed to see whether it is sentient or inanimate, whether it is tasty or yucky and whether it is indestructible or fun to destroy. Moreover, regular chewing is essential for maintaining the health of the dog's teeth, jaws, and gums. Thus, chewing is a perfectly normal, natural and necessary canine behavior.

The problem is not that the dog chews but rather, what the dog chews. Consequently, prevention and treatment of wanton house destruction should focus on redirecting the dog's chewing proclivities exclusively to articles that the owner considers to be both appropriate and acceptable chew toys.

If we try to look at things from the dog's point of view, there are only so many things a dog can do when left at home alone for long periods of time. It is not as though the dog can watch the soaps on the television do needlepoint or complete The Times crossword puzzle. When left alone, the dog's choices of recreational activities are severely limited. Really all the poor dog can do is chew, dig, bark or snooze. Many chewing extravaganzas are the result of boredom - simply a result of the dog's relentless quest for some way to pass the time of day.

Separation anxiety is often cited as a cause for the dog's owner-absent destructive behavior. Dogs chew to relieve the anxiety of being left alone. Dependent dogs react worse to weekday solitary confinement if they are allowed unrestricted access to their loving owners at other times, for example during evenings and weekends.

It is vitally important to foster confidence and independence by actively teaching a companion dog how to enjoy the peace and quiet of its own company and specifically how to amuse itself and pass the time of day when its human companion is not at home. Otherwise, the dog will focus on the owners absence and fret, panic, and pine for the absent owner.

Thus, when at home it is a sound policy to periodically confine the dog for short periods with chew toys for amusement. Not only will the dog become accustomed to confinement but also, the owner may monitor the dog's behavior when confined.

Many dogs, however, are not the least bit anxious when their owners leave. In fact, they relish being left at home alone - a wonderful opportunity to act like dogs and specifically to have a good chew without catching any flak from their killjoy owners. Perhaps separation relief would be a more accurate and descriptive term than *separation* anxiety for the etiology of most dogs' owner-absent chewing.

Whatever the cause of chewing - animal nature, boredom, anxiety, or fun - the solution entails redirecting the dog's chewing tendencies to appropriate chew toys. Chew toys should be both indestructible and non-consumable.

The choice of chew toy depends on the strength and compulsive nature of the dog's chewing. Rawhide, Kongs, and open-ended long bones (e.g. beef femurs, now commercially available in pet stores) are fine with most dogs but not others. When compared to the cost of re-upholstering one couch, \$100.00 worth of chew toys seems to be a pretty wise investment for dog owners.

For some dogs, just putting down a few chew toys is sufficient to successfully redirect chewing activities. However, most owners must actively train their dogs to enjoy chewing chew toys.

