

Understanding and Managing Destructive Behaviours in Dogs

A Practical Guide for Dog Owners

Introduction

Destructive behaviour in dogs is a common concern for many owners, often leading to frustration and at times, a breakdown in the relationship between human and canine. As a level 5 dog behaviourist, I have encountered a wide range of destructive tendencies, from chewing and digging to excessive barking and household damage. It is essential to approach these challenges with empathy, professionalism and a deep understanding of canine psychology.

What Are Destructive Behaviours?

Destructive behaviours refer to actions by dogs that result in damage to property, themselves or their environment. Typical examples include chewing furniture, scratching doors, digging up gardens, shredding objects, or even self-mutilation such as excessive licking. These behaviours are not acts of spite or malice; rather, they are signals that the dog's needs are not being fully met.

Common Causes of Destructive Behaviours

- **Boredom and Lack of Stimulation:** Dogs are intelligent, social animals. Without adequate physical and mental stimulation, they may turn to destructive activities to occupy themselves.
- **Separation Anxiety:** Many dogs struggle with being left alone, leading them to chew, scratch, or bark excessively as a coping mechanism.
- **Teething (Puppies):** Just as with human infants, puppies experience discomfort as their adult teeth come in, prompting them to chew on various objects for relief.
- **Attention-Seeking:** Some dogs learn that destructive behaviour results in their owner's attention—even if it is negative.
- **Fear or Stress:** Loud noises, changes in routine, or new environments can trigger stress-related destructive acts.
- **Lack of Training or Boundaries:** Without clear guidance, dogs may not understand which behaviours are acceptable.

Identifying the Underlying Cause

A professional assessment is crucial for understanding why a dog is engaging in destructive behaviour. Observing when and where the behaviour occurs, the dog's overall health and any recent changes in the household can provide valuable clues. For instance, a dog who chews shoes only when left alone may be struggling with separation anxiety, whereas a puppy who chews everything may simply be teething.

Strategies for Managing Destructive Behaviours

- 1. Enrichment and Exercise:** Ensure your dog receives sufficient physical activity and mental stimulation. Interactive toys, puzzle feeders and varied walks can make a significant difference.
- 2. Training and Positive Reinforcement:** Teach your dog what is acceptable to chew or play with. Reward good behaviour and redirect inappropriate actions towards suitable alternatives.
- 3. Managing the Environment:** Puppy-proof your home by removing tempting objects. Provide safe chew toys and consider using deterrent sprays on furniture if necessary.
- 4. Addressing Separation Issues:** Gradually acclimatise your dog to being alone using desensitisation techniques. In severe cases, consult a behaviourist for a tailored plan.
- 5. Veterinary Check-Up:** Rule out any medical issues, such as dental pain or skin conditions, which may contribute to destructive tendencies.
- 6. Consistency and Patience:** Behaviour change takes time. Maintain a consistent routine and avoid punishing the dog, as this can increase anxiety and worsen the problem.

When to Seek Professional Help

If destructive behaviour persists despite your best efforts, or if it is severe (such as self-injury or household destruction), it is wise to consult a qualified dog behaviourist. Professional guidance can help uncover complex causes and develop an effective, compassionate intervention plan.

Destructive behaviours are not a reflection of a dog's character but rather a sign that their needs are not being met or that they are struggling to cope with their environment. With patience, understanding and appropriate strategies, most destructive tendencies can be successfully managed, strengthening the bond between you and your canine companion.

If you are concerned about your dog's behaviour, don't hesitate to reach out for professional support. Together, we can help your dog thrive in a happy and harmonious home.



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