

Destructive Behavior

Cats

Why Do Cats Scratch?

It's normal for cats to scratch objects in their environment for many reasons:

- To remove the dead outer layers of their claws.
- To mark their territory by leaving both a visual mark and a scent - they have scent glands on their paws.
- To stretch their bodies and flex their feet and claws.
- To work off energy. Because scratching is a normal behavior, the goal in resolving scratching problems is to direct the scratching onto acceptable objects and provide appropriate outlets.

Training Your Cat to Scratch Acceptable Objects

1. You must provide objects for scratching that are appealing, attractive, and convenient from your cat's point of view. Start by observing the physical features of the objects your cat is scratching. The answers to the following questions will help you understand your cat's scratching preferences:

- Where are the objects located? Prominent objects, objects close to sleeping areas, and areas near the entrance to a room are often chosen.
- What texture do they have – are they soft or coarse? Carpeted?
- What shape do they have – are they horizontal or vertical?
- How tall are they? At what height does your cat scratch?

2. Now, considering your cat's demonstrated preferences, substitute similar objects for her to scratch (rope – wrapped posts, corrugated cardboard, or even a log). Place the acceptable object(s) near the inappropriate object(s) that she's already using. Make sure the objects are stable and won't fall over or move around when she uses them.

3. Cover the inappropriate objects with something your cat will find unappealing, such as double sided sticky tape, aluminum foil, sheets of sandpaper, or a plastic carpet runner with the pointy side up.

4. When your cat is consistently using the appropriate object, it may be moved. When moving, make sure to place the scratching object as close to your cat's preferred scratching locations as possible, like near your cat's sleeping areas or near the entrance of a room. Also make sure you move the object gradually over the course of several days/weeks.

5. Don't remove the unappealing coverings from the inappropriate objects until your cat is consistently using the appropriate objects in their permanent locations for several weeks, or even a month. They should then be removed gradually, not all at once.

Should I Punish My Cat For Scratching?

NO! Punishment won't change the behavior and may cause her to be afraid of you or the environment and may elicit defensive aggression. Used by itself, punishment won't resolve scratching problems because it doesn't teach your cat where to scratch instead. Rather, she'll learn to refrain from scratching in your presence but will continue to scratch when you're not around.

How Do I Trim My Cat's Claws?

To help keep them sharp, cats keep their claws retracted except when they're needed. As the claws grow too long and become curved, they can't be retracted completely. You should clip off the sharp tips of your cat's claws on all four feet every week or so. There are several types of claw trimmers designed especially for pets. Clipping your cat's claws will also help prevent them from becoming snagged in carpets, fabrics, and skin. When trimming, only cut off the sharp tips, making sure to not cut into the pink portion of the cat's nail, as it will bleed and be painful for your cat. If your cat is sensitive to having her nails trimmed, work on making good associations to having her feet messed with, by gently petting her legs and paws while giving her a treat. Build up to her tolerating her paws being handled. From there you can start to trim her nails, doing one nail at a time and then giving her a treat. Build up to doing all her nails on one foot and then all four feet. Don't push to do all four at once or you'll both have only negative memories of claw clippers. If at any time she does have an issue with her nails being trimmed, you have gone too fast.

Declawing?

We strongly discourage cat owners from having their cats declawed. Scratching is a natural behavior and instinct for cats and can be directed to appropriate items, such as a cat scratching post. Without the ability to claw, your cat may develop behavior problems that you have not previously experienced. However, if you feel that you must either declaw or give up your cat, we would rather see your cat stay in your home and be your lifelong companion. If you do decide to have your cat declawed, we suggest you have the surgery done at the same time she's spayed (or neutered if your cat is a male), that you only declaw the front paws, and that you always keep your cat indoors.

Dogs

It is normal for dogs to explore the world with their mouths. However, chewing can be directed into appropriate items so your dog is not destroying items you value. Until he has learned what he can and cannot chew, it is your responsibility to manage the situation as much as possible, so he doesn't have the opportunity to chew on unacceptable objects.

Managing the Situation

- Take responsibility for your own belongings. If you don't want it in your dog's mouth, don't make it available. Keep clothing, shoes, books, trash, eyeglasses, cell phones, and remote controls out of your dog's reach.

- Don't confuse your dog by offering him shoes and socks as toys and then expect them to distinguish between his shoes and yours. Your dog's toys should be obviously different from household goods.
- Until he learns, confine him when you are unable to keep an eye on him. Choose a "safe place" that is dog proof with fresh water and "safe" toys (see our handout: "Dog Toys and How to Use Them"). If your dog is crate trained, you may also crate him for short periods of time (see our handout: "Crate Training Your Dogs").
- Take your dog to an obedience class to teach him important commands, like "leave it." Classes may have the added benefit of reducing destructive behavior because they will help your dog burn off excess energy (see our handout: "The Educated Dog"). You can also do basic training at home, using clicker training (see our handout: "Dog Clicker Training").
- If, and only if, you actually catch your dog chewing on something he shouldn't, interrupt the behavior with a loud noise and offer him an acceptable chew toy instead. Play with him when he takes the toy in his mouth.
- Have realistic expectation. It is highly likely that your dog will, at some point, chew up something you value. This is often part of the transition to a new home.
- Dogs will engage in destructive behavior for a variety of reasons. In order to deal with the behavior, you must first determine why your dog is being destructive. Play, Boredom, and/or Social Isolation Normal play behavior can result in destruction, as it may involve digging, chewing, shredding, and/or shaking toy-like objects. Since dogs investigate objects by pawing at them and exploring them with their mouth, they may inadvertently damage items in their environment.

Your dog may be chewing for entertainment if:

- He's left alone for long time periods without opportunities for interaction with you or other family members.
- His environment is relatively barren, without playmates or toys.
- He's a puppy or adolescent (under 3 years old) and he doesn't have other outlets for his energy.
- He's a particularly active type of dog (like the herding or sporting breeds) who needs an active lifestyle to be happy.

Solutions:

- Play with your dog daily in a safe, fenced-in area. If you don't have a yard, a tennis court can be a good place to play. Fetch is a great game that will use up your dog's excess energy without wearing you out!
- Go for a walk. Walks should be more than just "bathroom time." On-leash walks are important opportunities for you and your dog to be together. Don't forget to allow time for sniffing, exploring, instruction, and praise.
- Increase your dog's opportunities for mental stimulation. Teach your dog a few commands and/or tricks using clicker training and practice them daily (see our handout: "Dog Clicker Training"). If you have time, take an obedience class.

- Provide your dog with lots of toys (see our handout: “Dog Toys and How to Use Them”).
- Rotate your dog’s toys to refresh his interest in them. “New” toys are always more interesting than old ones.
- Try different kinds of toys, but when you introduce a new toy, watch your dog to make sure he won’t tear it up and ingest the pieces.
- Consider the various types of toys that can be stuffed with food. Putting tidbits of food inside chew toys focuses your dog’s chewing activities on these toys instead of unacceptable objects.
- Make your dog’s favorite off-limits chew objects unattractive to him by covering them with heavy plastic, aluminum foil, hot pepper sauce, or a commercial “anti-chew” product.
- Consider a good doggie daycare program for two or three days a week to work out some of your dog’s excess energy. Separation Anxiety Dogs with separation anxiety tend to display behaviors that reflect a strong attachment to their owners. This includes following you from room to room, frantic greetings, and reacting anxiously to your preparation to leave the house.

Factors that can cause a separation anxiety problem:

- A change in the family’s schedule that result in your dog being left alone more often.
- A move to a new house.
- The death or loss of a family member or another family pet.
- A period at a shelter or boarding kennel. These behaviors are not motivated by spite or revenge, but by anxiety. Punishment will only make the problem worse. Separation anxiety can be resolved by using counter conditioning and desensitization techniques (see out handouts: “Separation Anxiety” and “Stress Relief for Your Pet”).

Attention-Seeking Behavior

Without realizing it, we often pay more attention to our dogs when they are misbehaving. Dogs who don’t receive much attention and reinforcement for appropriate behavior may engage in destructive behavior when their owners are present as a way to attract attention – even if the attention is “negative”, such as a verbal scolding. From a dog’s point of view, negative attention is better than no attention at all.

Solutions:

- Make sure that your dog gets plenty of positive attention everyday – playing, walking, grooming, or just petting.
- Ignore (as much as possible) bad behavior and reward only good behavior. Remember to reward your dog with praise and petting when he’s playing quietly with appropriate toys.
- Make his favorite off-limits chew objects unattractive or unavailable to him. Use aversive on objects that cannot be put away (see our handout “Aversives for Dogs”).
- Teach your dog a “drop it” command so when he does pick up an off-limits object, you can use your command and praise him for complying. The best way to teach “drop it” is

to practice having him exchange a toy in his possession for a tidbit of food (see our handout: “Teaching Your Dog to “Drop it”).

- Practice “Nothing in Life is Free” with your dog (see our handout: “Nothing in Life is Free”). This gets your dog in the habit of complying with your commands and is a good way to make sure he gets lots of positive attention for doing the right things – so he won’t have to resort to being naughty just to get your attention.
- Increase your dog’s opportunities for mental stimulation. Teach your dog a few commands and/or tricks using clicker training and practice them daily (see our handout: “Dog Clicker Training”). If you have time, take an obedience class.

Fears and Phobias

Some dogs are afraid of loud noises. Your dog’s destructive behavior may be caused by fear if the destruction occurs when he’s exposed to loud noises, such as thunderstorms, fire crackers, or construction sounds, and if the primary damage is to doors, doorframes, window coverings, screens or walls (see our handouts: “Helping Your Dog Overcome the Fear of Thunder and Other Startling Noises” and “Stress Relief for Your Pet”).

Solutions:

- You can work on your dog’s fear and reduce his stress using clicker training. See our handout or attend an obedience class. Puppies Chewing is normal teething and investigative puppy behavior (see our handout: “Dealing with Normal Puppy Behavior: Chewing”)

What Not To Do

Punishment is rarely effective in resolving destructive behavior problems and can even make them worse. Never discipline your dog after-the-fact. If you discover an item your dog has chewed even just a few minutes later, it is too late to administer a correction. Your dog doesn’t understand that, “I chewed those shoes an hour ago and that’s why I’m being scolded now.” People often believe their dog makes this connection because he runs and hides, or “looks guilty”. Dogs don’t feel guilt; rather they display appeasing postures like cowering, running away, or hiding when they feel threatened by an angry tone of voice, body posture, or facial expression. Your dog doesn’t know that he’s done something wrong; he only knows that you’re upset. Punishment after-the-fact will not only fail to eliminate the undesirable behavior, but might also provoke other undesirable behaviors.