

CHEWING

Question: *I have a young Labrador who is literally eating the siding off the house. He has a large yard to play in with lots of his own toys yet he insists on chewing. Is there anything I can do?*

Answer: Yes, there are several things that you can do to remedy this problem. Dogs chew at different stages in their life, for different reasons. Puppies chew during teething to help their emerging adult teeth erupt. Chewing that is a part of teething usually starts when the pup is about three months of age and diminishes as they reach six months. For puppies, trading inappropriate items for their own chew toys is best. A frozen washcloth is also a great choice to help inflamed gums and sore teeth.

Chewing problems with adolescent or adult dogs is most commonly related to boredom. Dogs generally don't entertain themselves very well, and a large backyard doesn't necessarily mean that your dog is getting the exercise that he needs. Dogs need both mental and physical exercise daily. Both of these needs can be fulfilled during a walk or exercise time in a large backyard. Most people are aware of the physical needs of their dog but many overlook the mental challenge which, if done correctly can be as fatiguing as a long run.

All walks should be started under the owner's control. That is to say, there are rules for going out the door and on the walk. Your dog should never go out the door first, unless directed by you to do so. In general, I prefer to see owners and dogs walk through the door together, or the owner preceding the dog. Once outside, the dog must be under control. This means walking by the owner's side in what is generally called a "heel" position. You can add to this basic training by asking the dog to sit at various points throughout your walk. Add variety by asking the dog to stay, walk to the end of the leash, wait for an increasing length of time, and then return to the dog. This is an especially challenging exercise if there are distractions present. Rather than shying away from the kids on bikes or skateboards, use them as teaching tools for your dog. After a period of work, your dog can be released with a word cue such as, "you're done", or "okay". In a leash free area, the dog can run and investigate. Most dogs, when off leash, will run ahead and then back to check in with their owner. By taking a walk with your dog in the leash free area, rather than just standing and watching, you are participating in the exercise, increasing the distance your dog will run and strengthening your bond with your pet. They may also run to the side of the owner's path to investigate interesting smells. Dogs should always enter and leave leash free areas under the owners control and listening to the owner's cues. A dog should never be released until the owner knows he or she has the dog's attention.

On days when you don't have much time for exercise, you can get some benefit from your own backyard. For dogs that like to retrieve, fetch can be a great way to burn off that extra energy. You can make the game more complicated by adding some rules. Putting rules on the game teaches self control and provides for mental stimulation, the second important component for daily exercise. Rules can be as simple as asking your dog to wait before you send him to retrieve his toy. You can eventually incorporate more of his obedience commands into the game.

Another good way to alleviate boredom is to enrich your backyard. Make breakfast time a foraging experience in the backyard. Take several "Kong's", stuff them with breakfast, freeze them to last longer and then hide them around the backyard. As your dog gets the idea that he's looking for his dinner, you can make the search more and more complicated. This idea is now used by zoos, and it has been proven to make a great improvement in the mental health of the captive animals. Another trick is to fill a gallon sized plastic bucket with water and some of the dog's toys, bits of food and freeze it. Your dog will have hours of fun trying to chew out the treats and toys from the ice block. There are a wide variety of "thinking" toys now available for dogs. From simple toys where a treat falls out if manipulated correctly to complex battery operated timed toy dispensers. Any of these will help provide entertainment for dogs that are left alone all day.

Chewing is normal but destructive chewing is almost always from a bored dog. For best results, you should use a combination of exercise, training and backyard enrichment. Remember the expression a good dog is a tired dog. It's really true!