

A Digging & Chewing Primer by Suezanne M. Law



What you consider a problem behavior might be, in fact, no problem at all for your dog - and that very fact is one of the primary reasons humans and dogs come into conflict. You see, left to their own devices dogs usually engage in perfectly dog-ish behaviors, digging and chewing being two of the most common (and the most fun - for the dogs, that is). But while digging and chewing are de rigueur in dog culture, humans tend to consider both acts the height of doggy discourtesy. And so, the conflict rages on: dogs dig and chew because they like to dig and chew, and digging and chewing are perfectly dog-ish things to do; and humans gnash their teeth and tear their hair looking for a punishment that will actually work.

It never works.

Punishment might seem like it works to cure these kinds of behaviors, but here's what really happens: your dog engages in a perfectly dog-ish behavior such as digging or chewing, and is reinforced for that behavior by his own pleasure; you arrive on the scene and proceed to scold your dog vehemently for his quite natural, intrinsically reinforcing behavior; punishment suppresses behavior - not just digging and chewing behavior, all behavior - so your dog lies down and quietly waits until you stop berating him; satisfied that your dog will now "behave" himself (when in actuality he is doing anything but) you leave the scene; eventually your dog remembers how much fun he was having before his human, Old Grumpy-Pants, came home and returns to his favored activity - careful now though, to note your whereabouts so as to avoid another ugly scene. You have just taught your dog to hide his fun from you.

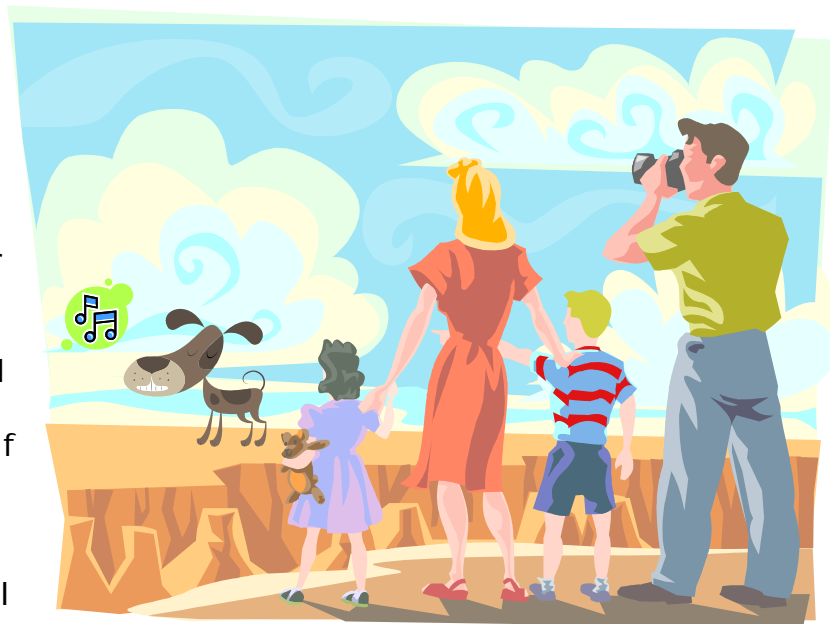


So what's a human to do? **First supervise, supervise, supervise!** Don't let your dog be reinforced for inappropriate behavior. Reinforcement increases behavior, and nothing that you do to your dog after the fact can take away from the reinforcement that happened in the moment he engaged in that behavior. **Second, provide ample opportunity for your dog to engage in perfectly dog-ish behaviors in appropriate ways:**

- Exercise your dog regularly to reduce excess energy.
- Provide rugged chew-toys your dog can really (no, really!) sink his teeth into; and make those toys interesting and fun by stuffing them with

yummy treats, dousing them in broth, rubbing them down with peanut butter... whatever you need to do to encourage a fierce and healthy chew-toy habit.

- Build your dog a sandbox and bury his favorite outdoor toys and bones in the sand for him to find.
- Engage in all of these fun activities **with** your dog - dig in the sand with him, hold his chew-toy for him while he gnaws away - make fun happen when you are together so that he doesn't have to go away from you to seek it out!
- And most of all, **approach your dog with an understanding of perfectly dog-ish behavior and how reinforcement acts upon it; and try to have a sense of humor: if your dog does something really outlandish, you could at least sell tickets!**



This dog training tip sheet has been made available to you by Sympawtico Dog Training, LLC and your pet care professional:

For more information on preventing problem digging & chewing, please contact:

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