

110 Puppy Behavior and Training

Dealing with Undesirable Behavior

How do I prevent my puppy from doing damage or getting into mischief?

The first step is to establish a daily routine that answers all your puppy's needs such as walks and exercise, social bonding, play and training, feeding, and sleeping (see (54) Enrichment, Predictability, and Scheduling). The general rule for dog training is "set the dog up for success." Supervise the puppy at all times until it has learned what it is allowed to chew, and where it is supposed to eliminate. Keeping the puppy on a 10-foot lightweight leash is an excellent way to keep it in sight, and to train it not to wander off. This is particularly helpful with a highly investigative puppy or for a very busy household.



At any time that the puppy cannot be supervised, such as during the night or when you need to go out, house it in a secure area. An escape-proof crate, a dog run, or a collapsible pen is simple, highly effective, and, most important, safe (see (50) Crate Training – Positive Confinement – Why to Crate Train, (51) Crate Training – Guide – How to Crate Train, and (52) Crate Training – Synopsis).

The puppy could also be confined to a room that has been carefully dog-proofed. When selecting your dog's confinement area it is useful to consider a number of factors. The dog will adapt fastest to the new area if it is associated with rewards. Have the puppy enter the area for all its treats, toys, and perhaps food and water. The area should have some warm, dry, comfortable bedding, and avoid placing the puppy in the area when you are angry or reprimanding the puppy (although it can, and should, be used to prevent problems). Avoid housing the puppy in isolated areas where there is minimal human contact, such as in a laundry room or basement. In fact, often the best area is a kitchen (so that this can also be the dog's feeding area) or a bedroom (so that it becomes the dog's sleeping area). Each time the puppy needs to be confined, it should first be well exercised and given an opportunity to eliminate. Another consideration in selecting the type of confinement area is how long you may need to leave the dog alone. You must provide an area for elimination anytime the puppy will be left alone for longer than it can control its elimination. A room or collapsible pen with a paper-covered area would be needed if the puppy is being left alone for prolonged periods. A cage or crate could be used for owners that do not have to leave their puppies confined for longer than 2 or 3 hours (see (51) Crate Training – Guide – How to Crate Train for instructions on crate training your puppy).

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“Avoid punishment for new puppies.”

What is the best way to punish my puppy for misbehavior?

Every effort should be made to avoid punishment for new puppies, as it is generally unnecessary and usually poorly timed and can lead to avoidance of family members at a time when bonding and attachment is critical. By preventing problems through confinement or supervision, providing for all of the puppy's needs, and setting up the environment for success, little or no punishment should ever be required. If a reprimand is needed, an immediate (during the act) verbal "no" or "off" or a sharp noise is usually sufficient to distract a puppy so that you can then redirect the puppy to the correct behavior. If not immediately successful there is no point in repeating the technique. Puppies that are supervised with a remote leash can be immediately interrupted with a light pull on the leash (see (23) Using Punishment Effectively, (24) Why Punishment Should Be Avoided, (56) Learn to Earn – Predictable Rewards, (57) Learning, Training, and Modifying Behavior, and (61) Teaching Calm – Settle and Relaxation Training).

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What should I do if my puppy misbehaves?

Undesirable misbehavior must be prevented or corrected in the act. Allowing the puppy, even once, to perform an undesirable behavior such as entering a restricted room, jumping up, mounting or jumping onto the couch usually will serve to reward and encourage the repetition of the behavior.

There will be times when your new puppy misbehaves. How you respond to the puppy will often influence later interactions. Young puppies are very impressionable. Harsh physical reprimands are contraindicated. They only serve to frighten the puppy and perhaps make them hand shy. Unfortunately, animals can learn in one trial if something is aversive enough. We want young puppies to look toward a human hand as something pleasant that brings comfort, food and affection. Most puppies can be easily interrupted with vocal intonation or a sharp reprimand. What is equally important is to redirect the puppy to the correct behavior after you interrupt what you do not like. Remember that any reprimand or punishment must take place while the behavior is occurring, not after.

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If you catch your puppy misbehaving, try a loud noise such as clapping your hands or a loud "uh-uh" or a sharp "off." Remember, reprimands need to occur while the behavior is happening, preferably just as it begins, and never after. Often puppies will be startled when they hear these noises and temporarily stop the behavior. At that time, you should redirect the puppy to a more appropriate task and reinforce with an immediate and positive "good dog."

Another way to interrupt your puppy is with various types of noise devices. One such device is a "shake can". You can make an inexpensive shake can by putting a few pennies into an empty soda can and taping it shut. When given a vigorous shake, it makes a loud noise, which will interrupt the puppy's behavior. Ultrasonic and sonic dog-training devices are also available (see (11) Behavior Management Products). Appropriate noninteractive punishment varies for each puppy and should be enough to interrupt the undesirable behavior but not enough to cause fear, anxiety or apprehension. The most important part of a punishment sequence is to praise the puppy as soon as it stops the misbehavior and then redirect to a better behavior. You may need to remove the target of the puppies' misdeed. If you find that you are continually punishing the same misdeeds, then the problem is supervision and access to appropriate behaviors and those must be corrected for the problem to change.

Because animals are not verbal, avoid long exhaustive lectures about the puppy's misdeed.

The most important thing that you can do to avoid undesirable behavior is to supervise your puppy. Unsupervised puppies will chew and destroy objects as part of their natural curiosity and play. Rather than finding yourself with the need to reprimand your puppy, keep your puppy on a leash to avoid bad behaviors. Always provide suitable play objects designed to entertain your puppy so that it will not want to destroy your possessions (see (87) Destructive Behavior – Chewing and (88) Destructive Behavior – Digging).

Most important, if you find something that your puppy has destroyed but you did not catch him in the act, just clean it up and vow to supervise your puppy better in the future. Chewing things is normal puppy behavior; it is up to the humans to prevent that from happening. Do not go get your puppy and bring him over to the mess and yell and physically discipline him. Remember that you need to punish the behavior you wish to change at the time it occurs. If you did not see your puppy chew up the object, all you are doing is disciplining your puppy for being present when there is a mess on the floor. Since that makes no sense to your puppy, your reprimands could create fear and anxiety, which could lead to aggression and owner avoidance.

How can I prevent problems?

Supervise the puppy at all times that it is not confined to ensure that the puppy does not get itself into mischief, or cause damage to itself or the home. Of primary importance is that keeping the puppy engaged in desirable behaviors (chew toys, feeding toys, stuffed toy, training exercises) and tiring it out sufficiently so that it rests or sleeps, then undesirable behaviors are effectively prevented. Leaving a remote leash attached is all that is usually needed to prevent or interrupt inappropriate behavior such as garbage raiding, chewing on household items, house soiling, or wandering off into rooms or areas that are out of bounds. If the leash is attached to a head halter you can quickly correct other problems that might arise, such as nipping, play biting, and jumping up. When the puppy cannot be supervised, confinement (discussed above) will be necessary. See (112) House Training for guidance in training your puppy to eliminate in the proper location.

What can be done for the particularly stubborn, disobedient, or headstrong puppy?

Puppies, like people are individuals, some are more energetic, busy, bold, exploratory or intense than others. Often a dog or puppy described as stubborn simply does not have a good understanding of the rules and expectations that are required living in the human world. Contrary to popular jargon, these are not “bad” or “dominant” puppies but rather high needs, overachievers of the dog world. These puppies need close supervision, prevention of problematic behaviors and nearly constant management. The problems include engaging in excessive solicitous, attention seeking behavior which should not be rewarded but instead the puppy should be taught to sit and wait nicely before receiving the social interaction he desires. Other puppies may have exuberant play behaviors and they may need special rules especially if play results in biting or if attention seeking behaviors are excessive. Punishment is not useful in these situations and often increases agitation. Instead seek the advice of a trainer, veterinarian or veterinary behaviorist as soon as the problematic behaviors are detected.

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“Puppies that seem to be headstrong and stubborn might need constant management, clear expectations, and appropriate satisfaction of their social and exploratory needs.”



One of the best management tools for gaining safe and effective intervention at all times is a head collar. The puppy can be supervised and controlled from a distance by leaving a long line or leash attached to the head halter. The principle of halter training is to gain gentle control over the dog with as much natural communication as possible and without the use of punishment. Positive reinforcement is used to encourage proper behavior. A pull on the leash is used to disrupt misbehavior. Since the halter is attached to the dog's muzzle, common behavior problems (e.g., nipping, barking, jumping up, pulling, stealing food), (see (113) Play Biting, (95) Greeting Behavior – Jumping Up, (101) Stealing and Stay Away, (64) Teaching Loose Leash Walks, Backing Up, and Turning Away, (63) Teaching “Give” and “Drop,” (82) Barking and Training “Quiet” and (83) Barking and Training “Quiet” – Synopsis) can immediately be interrupted without fear or pain by pulling on the leash. The halter places pressure around the muzzle and behind the neck. This allows effective, but gentle control of the head and mouth thus interrupting and redirecting the pet (see (65) Training Products – Collars and Harnesses, (66) Training Products – Head Halter Training, (67) Training Products – Head Halter Training – Synopsis and (68) Training Products – To Choke or Not to Choke).

What must I do to provide for my puppy's needs?

Chewing, play, exercise, exploration, feeding, social contact and elimination are basic requirements for all puppies. By providing appropriate outlets for each of these needs, few problems are likely to emerge. Puppies should be given chew toys that interest them and occupy their time. When supervised, the owner can allow the puppy to investigate and explore its new environment and can direct the puppy to the appropriate chew toys (and away from inappropriate areas). Play, exercise, affection, training, and handling must all be part of the daily routine. New tasks, new routines, new people, and new forms of handling can be associated with rewards to ensure success. And, of course, the puppy will need to be provided with an acceptable area for elimination, and will need guidance until it learns to use this area (see (54) Enrichment, Predictability, and Scheduling, (12) Behavior Resources, and (17) Working for Food).

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