

Dogproofing Your House

Just as parents with young children must childproof their homes, people with dogs, especially young ones, need to dog-proof the premises. A child will eventually learn reasons to leave certain things alone, but the dog will never understand the value of property or the risk of getting hurt.

Training

Whenever you're supervising your dog for houstraining, you can use the opportunity to teach safe chewing behavior. Every time you see the dog start to chew the wrong thing, redirect the chewing to an appropriate dog toy.

As the dog matures and you've given many, many repetitions of directing the chewing to the right items, the dog forms the habit of reaching for the right toys. Dog-proofing the house helps this process by preventing the dog from making wrong choices when you're not supervising.

Harsh corrections don't help the training, and in fact can interfere with it, and cause more serious problems. Instead of punishing, simply interrupt the dog's chewing of any inappropriate item and instantly switch the dog to a suitable chew toy. Keep dog toys in easy reach in all places where you and your dog spend time, so you'll be able to make the switch quickly.

Carefully observe what things especially interest your dog. You'll want to be sure to make these items inaccessible to the dog when you're not supervising.

Temptations and Tactics

Dog-proofing offers wonderful opportunities to exercise your creativity! The smarter your dog, the more interesting the creative challenges will be. Smart dogs need smart owners! Here are some ideas about things dogs are attracted to and a few possible dog-proofing solutions:

1. Garbage. *This includes chicken bones and the other food refuse discarded in the average household. Dogs love this stuff and it poses serious risks to them. Many dogs will eat just about anything with food on it, including metal or glass. When you are closely watching your dog, surprise the dog with a sharp sound to interrupt a garbage raid. Particularly with a young dog who doesn't know you're there, this sound can make a lasting impression.*

When you're not closely supervising, though, place garbage where it is impossible for the dog to get it. A commercial-type metal garbage can with a secure closure is one solution. Putting garbage behind a securely closed door is another. You may be able to keep garbage under a kitchen counter with a childproof device on the cabinet doors. For some dogs it works to put the garbage up high, but dogs can surprise you with their jumping abilities.

Don't trust training when it comes to unattended dogs and garbage. The instinct to get into this stuff is powerful, and every time the dog does it, the dog gets a food reward. Dogs don't

understand that eating certain things can make them sick. Dogs are highly motivated to get into garbage, and their lives can depend on us making it impossible for them to do so.

2. Trash. Trash is paper and other refuse that's not actually food, but still may interest a dog. Some dogs are obsessed with eating paper, especially tissue. Dangerous stuff can get tossed in with paper. Dogs operate more on scent than on sight, so the dog is aware of things the people aren't seeing and therefore aren't thinking about. The safest course is to keep trash out of dog reach, too.

The good news about trash is that you probably have less of it to deal with, making it more practical to find places up high to keep it. The dog is less attracted to it than to garbage, so the countertop may work for trash. For safety's sake, place anything dangerous to dogs in a more secure container.

3. Beds and sofas. You may not want your dog to get on your beds and sofas because you don't like the shedding, or you're allergic, or you have a fancy spread. If you keep the dog off this furniture at all times starting with puppyhood and no one ever breaks the rule, it's conceivable you might raise a dog who simply stays off.

If your dog has tasted the forbidden fruit of getting on furniture, you'll probably need to cordon off the area when you're not around. Dogs like soft places to rest as much as people do. Be sure to provide your dog with ample soft places to rest. This need is legitimate for a dog, as many of them have serious orthopedic problems at some point in life.

Another issue with beds and sofas can arise when a dog starts urinating there. Sometimes it's a territorial issue, even a dog offering to defend this family with life and limb—rather noble, really. Urinary incontinence can make a dog leak during sleep. And a dog may start urinating on the bed if urination hurts because of an infection. In cases like this, you may need to limit the dog's access to furniture only until you get the urination problem resolved through medical or behavioral intervention.

You can use closed doors, baby gates, exercise pens, crates, and even stuff laid over the furniture to keep the dog off when you're not supervising. In the case of a dog getting into multiple things when you're gone, confining the dog to a crate or dog-safe room may be the best course. When the dog is only getting into one thing, you may just want to gate off that area. Creativity!

4. Countertops and Tables. Tasty food left in a dog's reach with no one around to supervise is asking for trouble! As with garbage, the dog is tempted and gets a food reward for taking the bait. No punishment after the fact teaches the dog to leave food alone, and such punishment can damage your relationship and the dog's temperament. [See for one problem this punishment can cause.]

Don't leave food out unless you're supervising, and then use the opportunity to train. Just as with the garbage, try for the element of surprise. Startling the dog at the right moment and when the dog is young and impressionable is your best training option.

After the dog has been tempted, yielded to temptation and gotten the food reward several times, you may be dealing with a lifelong behavior. Some dogs are much more accomplished thieves than others. They tend to be the smarter ones, too, and that has its rewards in other activities.

A dog's life is too short to waste precious time with anger. If your dog requires extra supervision, just provide it and don't let that spoil your relationship and enjoyment of your dog.

5. Holidays. Whenever things are different at the house and everyone is busy, think ahead about your dog's needs. The holidays are prime time for dogs to get into dangerous things such as festive food, presents under the tree, decorations, and anything else you can think of—or would never think of! Dogs perceive the world quite differently from humans, and it takes experience to learn to anticipate what your dog might get into.

Consider confining your dog on busy holidays, either with a designated handler watching over the dog in a safe place for the dog to hang out, or perhaps by gating off all the festive areas. Some dogs are better off at grandma's house or boarded for a few days until the excitement is over.

Visiting children under school age are another reason to take extra-special care with holiday visitors. Never leave the kids alone with the dog, and it's better if there is one child-skilled adult handling the child while a dog-skilled adult handles the dog.

6. Guests. Whether it's one guest, a dinner party, a kid's birthday party or a backyard barbecue, guests at the house can create completely unexpected dog-proofing issues. Anything in a visitor's purse may tempt your dog. Guests likely are not accustomed to keeping their food out of dog reach, and you may be too busy to watch the dog.

Have two options ready to use on no notice: a leash hanging by the entry door, and a confinement area ready and waiting. One option or the other will handle most situations where you just don't have control of the behavior of the people in your home.

7. Door Security. Until your dog is trained not to exit your door without permission, use a double-barrier system at the door. This means that you secure the dog in some other way—such as behind a barrier or on a leash—before opening the door that leads to an outdoor, unfenced area. Do this every single time until the dog is reliably trained not to dash out the door. The temptation to dash out a door is just too much for dogs new to a home, and it causes the death of many.

8. Special Temptations. Things that carry your scent are especially appealing to your dog. It's a compliment to you, but of course not something you want happening. These items include your bottles of medication, remote controls, shoes, children's toys, gloves, eyeglasses and clothing—especially underwear.

Leaving stuff on the floor makes the dog think it's all dog toys. A house with a dog needs to be kept picked up. Don't try to "train" the dog by chasing, cornering, and punishing for picking up human stuff. This approach causes serious problems, even aggression.

If you slip up and your dog gets something of yours and starts to run with it, run AWAY from your dog. Encourage the dog to chase you, and swap something nice for that toy. This is a golden opportunity to teach your dog to retrieve.

9. Outdoor Hazards. Does it sound like all the trouble happens indoors, so your best bet is to just stick the dog outside to live? Chances are your dog would be in more danger there, have opportunities to do just as much damage, and put you at risk of having to deal with the

authorities over issues such as noise that illegally disturbs the peace. People teasing your unattended dog through the fence can ruin the dog's temperament, too.

The safest way to handle outdoor hazards is to supervise your dog whenever the dog is out there. Eventually there's a good chance your dog can stay safely unattended loose in your house, but it's less likely the dog would be safe unattended in your yard.

Time is on Your Side

As your dog matures, develops good chewing habits from your training and supervision, and settles down a bit, dog-proofing gets easier. Keep noticing your dog's current interests and removing those particular temptations whenever you can't watch over the dog. This is less work than cleaning up afterward, and less traumatic than having a dog injured by getting into the wrong stuff.

If your dog suddenly starts getting into the wrong things more than usual, consider a physical problem. Check your dog's weight and condition out with your veterinarian and have any indicated testing done.

An increase in scavenging and destructive chewing can also accompany anxiety and other disruptions to a dog's schedule or life. It's a natural reaction to various physical and emotional stresses. Try to find and eliminate that stress—whether it's a physical problem or an emotional one--before the new mischievous behavior becomes a habit. That will reduce risks as well as the time it takes to return your dog to safe habits.

Kathy Diamond Davis is the author of the book . Should the training articles available here or elsewhere not be effective, contact your veterinarian.

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