

How to Puppy-Proof a Home

BACKGROUND

Puppies are a fun, new addition to any home, but they can also bring a level of frustration to any family. Puppies love to explore, chew, and play. This is part of their charm, but some things need to be kept off limits for their benefit. Therefore, as a puppy's caretaker, it is your responsibility to adapt things around your home to minimize risks of injury and damage ("puppy proof" the home) for your puppy's safety and, as often as not, for your own peace of mind.

GETTING STARTED

Equipment/materials that may be useful:

- Puppy crate
- Toys
- Puppy bed
- Food and water dishes
- Childproofing materials
- Chew toys for dogs

TROUBLESHOOTING BEFOREHAND

The main thing to avoid when dealing with a puppy that has caused a problem (such as damaging something valuable or urinating or defecating in the home) is to resist the urge to punish. Puppies simply don't understand that a loud voice or a physical punishment after the fact means they were not supposed to do something that felt natural to them at the time. No amount of scolding or striking an animal conveys the link between punishment and "bad deed." Puppies treated this way learn to hide from the person doing the punishing (which then is sometimes misinterpreted by the person as "He/she knows that was a wrong thing to do," and the cycle of misunderstanding is perpetuated). The puppy can become more confused about why someone is scolding them and may develop behavioral problems in addition to not understanding right from wrong.

PROCEDURE

As a puppy owner you should understand that everything is new to them. They do not know what is good or bad for them, what may hurt them (electrical cords, poisonous plants, etc.) or that what they are chewing on is actually destroying an expensive piece of furniture, clothing, or other valuable human possession.

The first step in preventing injuries and damage is to cast a critical eye over the entire home as soon as possible after the puppy has arrived, or ideally beforehand. The goal is to identify potential problems and remove them from the puppy's reach or block the puppy's access to them. There are some very common culprits for items that cause the greatest harm to puppies and are the most frequently encountered reasons for puppy emergency room visits (and fatalities). Be sure to remove any of the following items that a puppy can chew, or place them high enough that the puppy cannot reach them:

- Electrical/extension cords and power strips
- Plants
- Household cleaning products and other chemicals
- Medications and other drugs (human or veterinary), especially pills or capsules that have been dropped by elderly relatives and have rolled under a dresser or in some equally remote place that a small puppy can still reach

- Virtually anything in a garage, utility room, or shed. Above all, be sure to look for the telltale fluorescent bright green liquid on the garage floor or pavement where cars park, indicating antifreeze. Ethylene glycol is the most common component of antifreeze and just 2 or 3 good licks of it by a puppy are enough to cause end-stage (fatal) kidney failure in 48 to 72 hours. Unused or spilled antifreeze should be brought to a hazardous waste disposal site, whereas small amounts that are spilled should be diluted extensively with water (hosed down) and drained away without allowing the puppy or any other animal near enough to lick it. It smells and tastes sweet, so puppies are drawn to it; antifreeze ingestion is one of the most devastating, and preventable, puppy accidents.

Other items are commonly chewed on or eaten by pups, but these are lesser risks to the pup and more of a nuisance to owners and families. They include:

- Shoes
- Children's toys
- Clothing
- Books, magazines
- Remote controls
- Blankets
- Toilet paper
- Trash cans
- Candles
- Baking towels, cleaning rags
- Food on the counters

Puppies must also be trained; that way they can learn what they are allowed to chew on and play with. Puppy training classes are excellent for socialization of the pup and building a two-way bond between you and the pup, such that the pup wishes to please you. This can go a very long way toward the pup's understanding that your lavish praise for urinating or defecating outside rather than indoors, chewing on a rawhide rather than a purse, and sitting and staying when told to do so makes them feel good about continuing these positive, nondestructive behaviors.

The house should be examined every day for items left on the floor or in view of puppies. People may come into the house and take off shoes or boots, leave jackets or other objects on a chair, and so forth. Such items are attractive to puppies when there are no other alternatives that are more interesting. Be sure to do two things with these target items that puppies could destroy:

- Keep them out of the puppy's reach.
- Offer alternatives (rawhide bones, other chew toys, Kong-type hollow rubber cylinders that hold dog food or dog treats, etc.).

Although it can be difficult, a great advantage is for you to take a moment and think as the puppy thinks. For example, don't give the puppy an old shoe as a chew toy; he/she will then think it's acceptable to chew on all shoes.

If anyone in the family takes medications, vacuum the floors meticulously before bringing the puppy home for the first time, and survey the floors visually yourself to identify any tablets or capsules. This is especially important if you know that the person taking the medications often drops or forgets them. One normal human dose of a medication can, on the basis of a milligram of drug per pound of body weight, be a massive overdose for a puppy.

Also, remember to close the door to any room that is off limits.

Furniture is always a potential chew toy for pets. Be sure to offer chew toys that have a texture that is very different from that

of furniture, clothes, and other valuables. Chewing on a discarded piece of wood is no different to the pup than chewing on a table leg. Provide a variety of toys and chew bones for play. While interacting with puppies, entice them to play with those toys. A lot of teaching and positive reinforcement can occur during this time.

Consider what excites your puppy and whether this could be dangerous. For example, if he/she likes to play in a part of the home that is near the top of stairs, the distraction of playing could easily make the pup forget that the stairs are there. Falling from a height is one of the most common causes of death in newly adopted puppies (due to massive head injury), and this can be prevented by putting up light garden-type fencing around the bottoms of railings on landings, at the tops of stairs, and on balconies.

Dogs of any age, and puppies in particular, can have their attention swayed enormously by their surroundings. Something that attracts a dog can completely override any voice command you give, and this is especially true during youth (1 year old or less). Never play with your puppy off-leash in an area where there is the potential for danger, such as being near a road (even if traffic seems light or almost nonexistent). Veterinarians see case after case of puppies that “weren’t supposed to” run in front of a car, or be injured by another animal, or other trauma. You can help your pup learn the easy way that obedience is gratifying (because

you offer extensive verbal praise and a treat when he/she gets it right), and then you help your dog steer clear of dangers through a whole lifetime with commands such as “sit” and “heel” when danger is nearby.

AFTERWARDS

Anytime a puppy is caught chewing on the wrong items, he/she must be reprimanded immediately (while chewing on the item: a single, authoritative-sounding “No!”) and without physical punishment, then immediately given an alternative (such as a chew toy) and praised extensively if he or she begins to chew on the chew toy instead of the off-limits object. Puppies do “get it” if the message is consistent, not terrifying to them, and repeated every time so they understand as they mature.

Purchase a dog training book, and begin teaching puppies at a young age. They are intelligent and learn quickly; they can also learn how to outsmart you, so starting young is a benefit. Puppy classes also aid in the training of both owner and puppy.

Crate training can be an excellent tool when house-breaking puppies. Once your puppy is used to a crate, it becomes their home and is their comfort zone. This crate should be large enough for them to move around but small enough that they do not want to urinate or defecate in it. It should contain a blanket (but not if the puppy chews or eats it), some toys, and a water bowl.

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

Which plants are poisonous to my puppy?

Many house and landscaping plants are poisonous, and conversely some plants that were historically thought to be poisonous to dogs aren’t. You can consult the ASPCA Animal Poison Control Center website at www.aspc.org for a complete list of poisonous plants to keep away from any pet.

What if my puppy chews on an electrical cord?

This is a potentially catastrophic problem: if your puppy chews on an electrical cord, severe injury or death may result. Severe injury generally occurs to the mouth and tongue, causing lesions that may prevent your puppy from being able to eat or drink. Dogs with such injuries usually develop noncardiogenic pulmonary edema, a type of rapid, severe accumulation of fluid in the lungs that can cause suffocation within a few hours of the electrical cord bite. If you see any freshly damaged cords in your home (for example, the cord is damaged and there is still fresh saliva on the cord, or you see or hear your puppy biting the cord), you should take your puppy to your veterinarian immediately for an examination.

Isn’t crate training cruel?

No. Crate training is a safe training method that helps puppies become housebroken. *Crate training* refers to keeping the puppy in a closed cage (crate) in the home during your absence and at night. To make this work, it is essential to make the crate feel like a home for your puppy. Place it in the busiest part of your own home even if this is inconvenient at first, feed the puppy his/her food directly on the floor of the crate (no bowl) to discourage urinating or defecating in the crate, keep the crate cleaned at all times, and keep the door to the crate open whenever you are home so the puppy feels this is his/her special territory. Never place your puppy in the crate as punishment for having chewed an object or urinated or defecated in the wrong place. Together, these tricks help the puppy understand that the crate is a home, not a prison.

Practice Stamp or Name & Address