

For the Love of Stuffies: Teaching Your Dog Not to Destroy His Toys

Many dogs have one thing in common: they LOVE to chew, squeak, destroy, and kill all of their toys. While this can be fun for them, it poses some problems for owners and even the pup. Toys can get expensive, and if you're anything like me, you so love seeing their excitement when they get a new one that you can't resist denting your pocket book for their 5 minutes of fun. Then comes the clean up, and if you're not careful, a potential disaster. Dogs may ingest part of the toy, especially the squeaker, and that can get stuck in their systems leading to a dangerous situation and an expensive surgery. If your dog is a destroyer of all toys, read on to learn more about dog play and how to teach them to respect their toys, especially their stuffies.

Understanding Dog Play With Toys

Dogs play for a few reasons: **enrichment** (they are bored), **exercise**, **dental and jaw health** (chewing), **social interaction** (playing WITH you or another dog), and **prey drive** (the instinct to hunt, chase, kill, and destroy). These are all natural behaviors that simulate wild wolf hunting and social behavior and stimulate those instincts and muscles, so we should not try to prevent a dog from playing in any way. However, for their safety, our pocket book, and our sanity, we need to make sure that they are playing in a safe and appropriate way. It is important for you to observe your dog's play and try to understand which need or needs he is trying to satisfy with his play session. This can switch in mid session and all play evolves at some point. This is why observing play is so important. Different dogs show what they are looking for in different ways, but if you keep a good idea of what your dog wants while he is playing, you can provide the appropriate options for him. Some examples are: A dog brings you a toy: he is looking for interaction and wants to play with you! A dog starts chewing on a chair leg; he is looking to satisfy his need to exercise his mouth. A dog squeaks a toy incessantly; he is really enjoying killing that small animal.

Understanding Toy Destructive Behaviors

There are a few main behaviors dogs exhibit when destroying a toy. Knowing these behaviors will allow you to determine if the dog is showing appropriate play behavior with their toy or whether they are intent on destroying it. Keep in mind that many cheaper dog toys are not well made and seams may come apart through no fault of your dog except typical play. It is understandable that many people don't want to pay a lot for a dog toy if their dog will destroy it in 5 minutes though. I like to get a moderately expensive stuffie for this training: one that will last for a longer time during normal play, but not hit the pocket book too hard if the dog ends up damaging it while learning proper play.

1. **Dissection.** Dissection is when the dog takes part of the toy between their little front teeth and PULLS with the intent to pull a piece off, rip the toy apart, or pull stuffing out of it. This is exercising the same behaviors as when a wolf is pulling meat off of a bone or carcass. This is a natural behavior, however it is inappropriate when we are not eating the target (the toy).

2. **Carnassial Chewing.** Carnassial teeth are a dog's back teeth, similar to our molars. They are very sharp and work in a scissor like way to cut meat off of a carcass. Dogs will often chew holes in toys (or chew tags, ears, feet, ribbons off) by performing Carnassial Chewing. This type of chewing should be reserved for toys dedicated to chewing only, such as antlers or nylabones.
3. **Tugging.** Playing tug is great when done properly and simulates a wolf taking down large prey. Dogs LOVE to play tug of war! However, stuffies, especially the cheap ones, are not designed to withstand this behavior. We need to teach them which toys to bring us for playing tug, and which ones to give up easily so that they aren't damaged when you play with your dog with them.

Choosing The Right Toy For Play

It is important to provide your dog with many types of toys for his enrichment. Many dogs will have a favorite type, but giving them options will allow them to fulfill their needs and allow you to observe and see what your dog is looking to accomplish with his play session. Make sure you are using the appropriate toy for what your dog is looking to do. Do not encourage playing tug with stuffies or chew toys, since that can damage the toy or the dog's mouth and can encourage bad play choices. Be prepared to substitute a toy if a dog's play objectives change.

1. **Chew Toys:** These toys are for dental and jaw health and to keep jaw muscles in shape. This may not be important for our dogs that eat kibble or canned food, but the instinct to keep his mouth healthy is important for a wolf that has to bring down and eat whole prey. Dogs retained this need and it is a good idea to encourage proper chewing for the health of your pup's teeth and mouth. If your dog likes to chew and destroy toys, it is important to give him a positive alternative to your chair legs, couch cushions, and destroying his stuffies. Have chew toys with different hardness levels, but make sure you don't provide anything too hard based on how powerful your dog chews on things. Antlers are a good alternative to bones, which are usually too hard for dog teeth and can chip more easily. Very powerful chewers will need softer antlers, like moose, and of a larger size so that they can't crack or break the antler or their teeth. Synthetic chew toys like Nylabones and StoneBones provide a slightly softer chew toy. They also have different levels of hardness on the package and many come with subtle flavoring to increase the dog's desire to chew on them. Make sure if you have a powerful chewer you don't pick one that is too small or too soft that they can chew and swallow chunks off.
2. **Stuffies:** Plush stuffed animals, often with squeakers in them are a favorite of dogs. They can be an interactive toy, but they are mostly to satisfy a dog's instinct to kill small prey (and are a GREAT alternative to actually killing small prey!) Some dogs may like fuzzier toys so that they can groom them. These are the most often destroyed toy because what comes after killing is ripping prey apart and then eating it. Most ingestion issues with toys are from stuffies.
3. **Kongs and Puzzle Treat Toys:** A hard rubber toy that can have treats put into them. These are great to keep dogs busy and are usually very durable. They also come in different sizes and toughness levels. Choose the ones appropriate to your dog. Most dogs should be observed while playing with puzzle toys as they are not

meant for chewing and are usually made of cheap plastic that can break into sharp shards easily.

4. **Balls and Fetch Toys:** This is an interactive toy and a chase prey drive toy. Many dogs like to chew on balls until they pop. It is satisfying to them to destroy things. Fetch should be an interactive game and tennis balls are not safe for them to destroy and chew on once they are damaged.
5. **Tug Toys:** These are interactive toys and uses muscles and skills a wolf would use to pull down a deer. Ropes and Fleece tugs are great for play, but are not durable for chewing and small pieces of rope or fleece when ingested can be dangerous.

Training Your Dog

It is our job to teach our dog to choose the appropriate toy for what instinct or action they are trying to accomplish with their play. Now that you have a basic understanding of the reasons behind dog toy play and the different toys available, we will go over learning how to teach your dog these skills.

1. **Understanding Behavior Modification.** This training is considered behavior modification. We are not teaching a specific behavior, like “sit”. Rather we are changing the way a dog understands his toys and his play. Behavior modification training takes TIME, DEDICATION, and VIGILANCE, especially if the dog has been practicing toy destruction for his whole life. You need to be prepared to follow through with this training at EVERY play session if you want it to succeed. This method **does** work. My two dogs both destroyed stuffies when I got them. Now they have stuffies that they have had for YEARS with minimal damage that is usually due to poor seams from cheap toys. I actually have to keep buying bigger toy chests because I can’t stop buying them new toys and their other ones last so long! Additionally, my last foster started getting the picture after only a week of dedicated training. ***NOTE: If your dog has resource guarding issues with toys it is very important that you resolve those issues FIRST before attempting this training!
2. **A Set Up For Success.** As with any training, it is important to start off on the right foot. Set your dog and yourself up to succeed. This means going into training with a positive attitude and the proper tools and set up. When you are frustrated, your dog picks up on that, and it can cause negative reactions or a resistance to learning from you. Make sure you have a few toy choices available to you. I like to make sure the chew toys I have are ones that is very appealing like an antler that has recently soaked in warm water or a flavored Nylabone. Have a stuffie that you know they will love and want to destroy. Keep these things away from the dog for now. I like to have that awesome chew toy kept away most of the time to make it even more special for training. It is best to keep all toys except chew toys or toys the dog won’t destroy away from the dog except during training sessions. Every time your dog is allowed to destroy a toy because you weren’t watching him will make it that much harder for him to learn the new rules.
3. **Start With a Trade.** The first step of this training is teaching your dog to give up a toy. It is important to be very patient and gentle during this training. Any

attempt to force the toy away from the dog will only make the dog not want to give up his toys voluntarily and may lead to resource guarding behavior. Punishing the dog for guarding a resource will only teach him that he needs to fight harder for it. It is also important that you are not acting afraid of the dog during this training. Make it a fun training event, not a stressful one. Any negative emotions you have will only cause the dog to distrust you and not want to give up his prize to you.

- a. Have two identical toys of a type that your dog would love and not want to give back to you.
 - b. Give one of the toys to your dog.
 - c. Proceed to play with the other toy yourself. Make a big deal out of how fun YOUR toy is.
 - d. Eventually, your dog will think that the toy YOU have is more fun than his toy and will drop his toy to try to get yours.
 - e. Sometimes it can take days to weeks for the dog to give up the toy the first time. Try not to get frustrated and practice in short sessions. Always end the sessions on a good note. It is better to let the dog keep the toy and end it there than to try to force the dog to give up the toy.
 - f. Reward your dog with praise for dropping the toy by giving/throwing your toy to him.
 - g. Repeat, repeat, repeat.
 - h. Once your dog is readily dropping his toy for yours, add the command “drop” or “give” right before he drops it. Reward heavily with praise and giving him your toy.
 - i. Repeat, repeat, repeat.
 - j. Make your toy less fun. Ask your dog to “drop” the toy he has. If he drops the toy, jackpot reward him with lots of praise and play time.
 - k. Repeat, repeat, repeat.
 - l. Now reward with a treat instead of the other toy. Make sure it is a good, high value treat like a piece of hot dog or bacon or liver. If he won't drop the toy for a treat, make a big deal about how tasty the treat is. I usually say “oooh, look at what I have! Its so tasty!” etc. Be distracting with how amazing the treat you have is so that he forgets about his toy.
 - m. Repeat, repeat, repeat.
 - n. Replace the high value treat for a lower value treat like a crunchy biscuit and practice “drop” with that.
 - o. ALWAYS trade with your dog when you want him to give up something he values. Trade EVERY TIME so that your dog learns that only GOOD things will happen if he gives up his prizes instead of bad things.
4. **Vigilance is Key.** Now that your dog will give up a toy on command, offer the dog the new stuffy. Make it exciting and allow them to play with it. At the first sign that they are going to start destroying it (see Understanding Toy Destructive Behaviors above), correct them for the behavior (negative marker word such as “no” or “uh-uh”), ask them to give it up, and present them with the good chew toy. Praise them if they start chewing on it. Put the stuffie away up high or in a cupboard where they can't have it and will forget about it. Once the dog has

- forgotten about the toy, you can practice this again. Gradually, the destructive behaviors should start to lessen as the dog learns that those behaviors cause them to lose the toy. It should also help them learn to select an appropriate chew toy when they want to really go to town. Once the dog starts showing that they are learning not to be so destructive, start leaving stuffies around for them when you can be watching (if you are gone or can't be watching, make sure the stuffies aren't available). Make sure you are paying attention and ready to correct and redirect them if they start to perform any destructive behaviors.
5. **Generalization.** Dogs need extra training to generalize their new skills to different toys. Don't expect them to suddenly know that ALL toys should be treated gently just because he learned that THIS toy needs to be treated gently. Practice the above with all kinds of stuffies and balls and softer rubber toys that your dog has destroyed in the past.
 6. **Don't Make These Mistakes!** There are some common mistakes people make when going through this training. Each mistake will hamper learning or create a negative association for your dog towards you or toys.
 - a. **Take care not to correct any appropriate play.** Dogs play with their mouths and paws, and this may mean biting, tossing, or slapping at toys. Some biting may seem excessive if a dog is really trying to squeak the crap out of a toy. Do not correct a dog for just biting a dog toy. This is normal dog play behavior. Make sure that you are only correcting for the destructive behaviors listed above.
 - b. **Don't get rough or frustrated.** Any type of negative emotion from you when your dog chooses to be destructive will only make him feel negatively towards you or towards the toy. We don't want our dogs to avoid playing with toys and we certainly don't want them to distrust or dislike our presence. We need to firmly enforce our rules, but we also need to be fair. Dogs make mistakes when they are learning, just like people do. If a dog destroys a whole toy before you can get it away from him, it is likely you didn't do the "drop it" training thoroughly enough or you weren't watching him as closely as you should have been.
 - c. **Don't get distracted.** Getting distracted away from your dog's behavior is one of the most common reasons dogs get away with mistakes. People stop to check facebook, or answer a text, or check on their kids, etc and leave the dog without observation. A dog can easily destroy a stuffy in a minute or two, and every time you miss the behavior, it will take longer to extinguish.
 - d. **Don't buy toys inappropriate to your dog.** I've seen this a lot. People buy these adorable little fluffy stuffies for their very destructive 80lb lab and then get surprised when the toy only lasts 10 seconds and they didn't get any training done. When practicing this training, make sure you are using a toy appropriate to your dog's size and destructiveness level.
 - e. **Replace or repair damaged toys, cut off high incidence parts.** Don't leave a toy available to your dog with a tempting hole in it and stuffing sticking out. Cut off tags and snake tongues and other very tempting parts to make this training as easy as possible. Remember, set up to succeed!