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COMMON BEHAVIOR AND BEHAVIORAL PROBLEMS

"Undesirable behavior" is in the eye of the beholder. Many "bad habits" (chewing, mouthing, digging, jumping, chasing, barking) are natural, normal behaviors for a dog. But you can control and replace them with desirable behavior by taking the time to work with your dog. Give your dog opportunities to do something you can reward.

Activity needs. Most often, there is nothing wrong with reportedly hyperactive dogs. Dogs need attention and exercise - and when people don't give them enough, the dog has to do something with that excess energy. By the way, dogs don't do things out of spite, which is a human concept. They do things that, right or wrong, seem like ways to cope.

It helps to determine the source of unwanted behavior. It often stems from the frustration of being alone, since dogs are social animals. If you leave your dog for long hours on workdays, consider doggie daycare or a mid-day dog walker. In some cases, misbehavior results from stress between the human members of the home, or another environmental change such as the arrival of a new household member. Lastly, a change in diet may be needed.

Chewing. Chewing is how young dogs explore their environments and mature dogs relieve stress. Move chewable objects out of reach. Take up throw rugs. Shield or hide power cords. Spray Bitter Apple on furniture legs and wood trim. Make sure your dog always has access to his own chew toys. But limit the number of toys you give your dog, or he'll think nearly everything is fair game. Make a conscious effort to reward your dog for playing with the right toys. In addition, exercise your dog, and teach him obedience commands to redirect his energy.

When you catch him chewing something off-limits, direct him to "leave it," "drop it" or "out." This requires that you first teach your dog this command using positive reinforcement. When the dog drops the item, praise lavishly and give him an acceptable substitute to chew.

Barking. First, realize that some breeds were bred to bark. Next, figure out the key triggers of your dog's barking. Perhaps it's the mail carrier, children getting off the school bus, the neighbor coming out to mow his lawn, or daily joggers. As with many dog training issues, aim to reduce the opportunities as well as the incentives to misbehave.

If trigger events occur outside, bring him indoors before the triggers appear. He'll be less likely to bark when shielded from the opportunity. When he barks and the targets bypass or leave your property, this reinforces the barking behavior - and your dog figures he did his job well.

If you can't avoid the trigger events, be prepared to re-focus his attention on you. You can do this by using small treats and praise. Or before he focuses on the target for his barking, give a sharp, immediate leash correction. Re-direct his attention to you. Try to catch and stop him before he emits his first bark. Give the correction and command "no!" or "quiet!" When he attends to you, immediately praise him verbally and use tidbits to reinforce the praise. Keep this up and he will learn it is more pleasant not to bark.

The key is to break the barking cycle. To the dog, this cycle is: "Detect trigger person/event ... barkbarkbark...feel good and useful...the trigger leaves...my barking works great...I'll do that again!"

Jumping. Jumping and mounting are often behaviors dogs choose to seek a higher rank in the pack; sometimes they just jump out of excitement. Keep people from exciting your dog to the point of jumping up, barking or nipping. Often, jumping can be discouraged by simply ignoring the dog until he settles down. Just turn and walk away. You also can carry tidbits, and provide a treat and attention only when the dog sits calmly on command.

Out in the yard. Never leave a dog outside unattended, or overnight. Not only does this practice endanger your dog and subject you to legal liability, it too often leads to a nervous, troubled dog. Many dogs given up for "behavioral problems" had been kept outdoors or in basements. Also, dogs left outside dig holes or find a way under, over or through the fence. Even if your dog is not an escape artist, it helps to be there to correct him when he starts the self-rewarding act of digging.

Dogs want to be with their pack, and get lonely, bored and in trouble when alone. When you're not home, leave the dog in an area where the family spends a lot of time. You can start by confining him in a crate or with babygates until you've taught him good house manners.

Furniture-hogging. Decide on the furniture and other house rules, then all family members must abide by the decisions. Consistency is key to training. To teach your dog to stay off the furniture, snap a long leash to his collar when you are home (and leave it on only when you are in the same room). Use a quick leash correction as soon as he tries to hop up. He'll get the message quickly. Many trainers advise that dogs not be allowed on furniture because the elevated position can give a dog the sense that he is the alpha and can lead to aggressive displays. Instead, give dogs their own comfy beds and crates.

To keep dogs off furniture when you're not home, place or tape balloons on the furniture - dogs don't like popping sounds. You can also use large-size bubble wrap.

Bonding and insecurities. At first, your dog may be shy or needy. If he continues to cling to just one family member after the transition period, help him work through this problem. Using treats and vocal praise, gradually acclimate him to being near other family members. Have the other people do the feeding, walking and petting, so he associates them with positive, safe experiences.

Nipping and biting. When young dogs gnaw and nip, people often excuse this as "puppy behavior." But it's unacceptable behavior that will continue, and grow worse, if not corrected. Like a child, a dog will test the limits and to see who's boss. The root of a dog's biting may be in lack of early socialization, fear, dominance, confusion over his role in the pack, a health problem requiring a trip to the vet or a dietary imbalance. By reading books and consulting a professional, you can alter this behavior.

If your dog tries to nip during play, command "no" and immediately stop playing. If the leash is on, you can give a correction if he doesn't comply. Turn his eyes to meet yours to emphasize the point. You must feel and convey a leadership role. As soon as he calms down, say "good dog." Use your dog's name when giving praise; don't use it when in the act of correcting. Giving your puppy or dog something to chew on instead of your hand can also work.