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DIGGING

from Handbook of Behavior Problems of the Dog and Cat by W Hunthausen, G Landsberg & L Ackerman

Digging may be a nuisance, but it is an innate trait for many dogs. Sled-dog breeds such as Huskies and Malamutes dig holes that provide a cool place for them to lie. Terriers and Dachshunds were bred to flush out prey or to locate rodents in underground areas where digging is required. Other dogs may dig because their acute senses of smell and hearing inform them that there is something interesting beneath the ground. Since dogs often bury bones, it is not surprising that they should also dig to locate them once again. As a natural escape mechanism, some dogs use digging as a way to avoid confinement. Digging may also be an activity similar to destructive chewing that occurs when young dogs are left alone without sufficient stimulation.

When dogs become house pets, they often need to leave natural tendencies behind, such as digging, if they are to be good home companions. Most dogs have little problem with this compromise, as long as they have sufficient stimulation elsewhere in their lives. However, there are some dogs that are resistant to change and continue to dig despite other adequate outlets. They may dig because of lack of stimulation, to escape or because digging is fun.

DIAGNOSIS AND PROGNOSIS

Dogs dig for a number of reasons and, so it is important to determine the underlying cause. If the cause is not determined, you are only left with treating the symptoms which may not provide a satisfactory conclusion. Carefully interview the owner as to the circumstances surrounding the digging. If the digging is along the fence or near a gate, the dog may be digging to escape from the yard. An intact male may do this if he is aware of a female in estrous. If prey animals are available, they may be the stimuli for digging. If the pet is young, under stimulated and under exercised, it may occur as a recreational event. If the digging occurs near an outdoor cooking area, then spilled food may be the stimulus.

The prognosis varies considerably with the underlying cause. Under stimulated young dogs and intact males with a strong motivation to roam that have learned that digging provides freedom can be very frustrating to control. For these cases, keeping the dog indoors in a safe, destruction-proof area or providing a confinement area where the pet is unable to dig to escape may be the only viable solution. Discovering the underlying aetiology and having practical solutions available significantly improves the chances for successful resolution.

MANAGEMENT

Digging can be suppressed in the owner's presence. However, unless the cause is identified and dealt with, the digging will continue in the owner's absence. If the pet is digging to catch rodents, some thought should be given to capturing and removing them from the yard. If the pet is escaping to avoid mistreatment, the owner will need to be counselled to correct the situation. For dogs that are digging to escape, the motivation for the behavior should be elucidated and dealt with if possible. For example, if the dog is not getting enough exercise or social attention, this should be provided.

Environmental enrichment is most indicated for those dogs that dig because they have nothing better to do. Whenever the pet is left outdoors unsupervised, it is important to attempt to provide an appealing alternative activity to distract and occupy it. This distraction might include large balls to push around, or wooden boxes and ramps on which to crawl and explore. Large rubber toys can be stuffed with treats, tied to ropes and suspended from tree limbs for some dogs. The success in enriching the environment is variable and may be negligible for some pets. Increased activity, such as vigorous physical exercise (fetch, jogging, speed walking) provided two or more times daily, may help reduce the amount of time spent digging. Another option is to provide a sand/soil digging pit with partially buried toys and bones to encourage digging in one area instead of many.

When dogs are digging to create a cool respite, they may stop if given a cool, shaded area or wading pool is provided where they can cool off. Dogs that are digging as a response to fearful stimuli may enjoy the comfort and security of a dog house or other forms of shelter. If that can't be provided, anxiolytic medication may help. If the digging escape behavior is due to separation anxiety, behavior modification and medication may be necessary. For some dogs, confinement in a secure pen or run may be the best treatment plan.

Adding another pet may help, but the owner might also end up with two pets that dig and therefore twice the damage. Digging can be interrupted in the owner's presence by a variety of ways. This is best done by remote means so the dog does not associate the interruption with the presence of the owner. It can be accomplished by monitoring the dog and responding with a spray from a hose, turning on a lawn sprinkler, activating a remote spray collar, pulling on a long leash or installing a motion-activated sprinkler. Close supervision, consistent interruptions, and providing the dog with alternative activities will resolve the digging problem in most cases. If the dog digs in only one or two specific areas, these areas can be protected by placing chicken wire or heavy fencing over them and anchoring the wire to the ground.

Certain common practices must be discouraged absolutely. These include: delayed punishment; physical punishment; and filling the hole with water or faeces and holding the pet's head in it.

PREVENTION

Dogs should be closely supervised when outdoors during the first 12-18 months of their lives so that the owner can quickly interrupt digging behavior every time it is exhibited. A shake can (tin can filled with six to eight large coins) may be tossed next to the pet each time it starts to scratch the ground in order to discourage the behavior. Adequate exercise, training, toys and social stimulation are all very important. Young pets that are in the yard alone and allowed to entertain themselves by digging each day can be a challenge to correct.

If there is an acceptable area where the dog may dig in the garden, the owner might consider teaching the puppy to dig in that area soon after it has been brought into the home environment. Toys can be buried in the acceptable area to encourage the pet to dig there. Food or social praise can be used to reinforce the behavior. To accomplish this, the owner must always be with the pet when it is outdoors so that the correct behavior can be rewarded and digging in undesirable areas can be consistently interrupted. Timely interruptions are very important, because if the owner only uses positive reinforcement for digging in an appropriate area to condition the dog, it may take anywhere from a few months to a few years before it can be trusted not to dig in unacceptable areas in the garden.

Case Example

Sonic, an intact male Border Collie, was presented for digging under the gate to run in the neighborhood when the owner was at work during the day. Upon arriving home, the owner would see Sonic, call him, grab him by the collar and punish him for escaping.

The owner was told that punishing the dog when he arrived home at the end of the day, long after the pet had performed the escape behavior, was counterproductive. In fact, Sonic was starting to avoid the owner when he came home and was more hesitant to come when called. Neutering was recommended to decrease the possibility of sexually motivated escape and roaming behavior. More exercise by way of jogging and fetch was suggested. The owner purchased several inexpensive soccer balls and encouraged the pet to play with them by throwing and kicking them around the yard. The owner anchored a double thickness sheet of chicken wire along the ground in front of the gate. Whenever he found the dog investigating the ground near the gate, a shake can was tossed near it.

Sonic did extremely well as long as the owner remained attentive to him in the evening. He came to anticipate the play time and was eager for the owner's return home. However, Sonic did have relapses when the owner missed playtime for a few days in a row, and once when the owner was out of town for two days on business. The owner, upon realizing the situation, came up with a satisfactory solution for all concerned. He paid several of the neighborhood children to play with Sonic for at least one full hour on those days when he could or would not spend the time himself.