BEHAVIOR SERIES

How to Stop Your Dog from Digging

I DIG BECAUSE I CAN. It's the motto of dogs everywhere, and completely normal behavior.

Yet the reasons behind the activity are varied. Your dog may dig to seek entertainment, attention, comfort, escape, prey, or protection. (Despite how you might feel sometimes, your dog won't dig out of spite, revenge, or a desire to destroy your yard.) And just when you think you've outsmarted your pooch by finding ways to make the area where he digs unappealing, your dog will likely begin digging in other locations or display other unacceptable behavior, such as chewing or barking.

A more effective approach to the problem is to address the cause of the digging. Here's advice on how to figure out *why* your dog digs—and how to stop it.

Seeking Entertainment

Dogs may dig as a form of self-play when they learn that roots and soil "play back." Your dog may be digging for entertainment if:

- He's left alone in the yard for long periods of time without opportunities for interaction with you or others.
- His environment is relatively barren—with no playmates or toys.
- He's a puppy or adolescent (under three years old) and doesn't have other outlets for his energy.
- He's the type of dog that is bred to dig as part of his "job" (such as a terrier).
- He's a particularly active type of dog who needs an active job to be happy (such as a herding or sporting breed).
- He's recently seen you "playing" in the dirt (gardening or working in the yard).

Recommendations

Expand your dog's world and increase his "people time" in the following ways:

- Walk your dog at least twice daily. It's good exercise for both of you—mentally and physically!
- Teach your dog to fetch a ball or Frisbee®, and play with him as often as possible.
- Teach your dog a few commands or tricks. Practice these commands/tricks every day for five to 10 minutes.
- Take a training class with your dog and practice daily what you've learned.
- Keep interesting toys in the yard to keep your dog busy even when you're not around. Kong®-type toys filled with treats or busy-box dog toys work especially well. Rotate the toys to make them seem new and interesting.
- For dedicated diggers, provide an "acceptable digging area." Choose an area of the yard where it's okay for your dog to dig, and cover that area with loose soil or sand. If you catch your dog digging in an unacceptable area, interrupt the behavior with a loud noise and say, "No dig." Then immediately take the dog to his designated

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digging area. When he digs in the approved spot, reward him with praise. Make the unacceptable digging spots unattractive (at least temporarily) by setting rocks or chicken wire into the dirt. Make the acceptable area attractive by burying safe items for him to discover.

Seeking Prey

Dogs may try to pursue burrowing animals or insects that live in your yard. Your dog may be pursuing prey if:

- The digging is in a specific area instead of at the boundaries of the yard.
- The digging is at the roots of trees or shrubs.
- The digging is in a "path" layout.

Recommendations

- Search for possible signs of burrowing animals or insects and then make your yard unwelcome to them. Avoid methods that could be toxic or dangerous to your pets or other animals. For advice on dealing humanely with wildlife, visit *www.wildneighbors.org*.

Seeking Comfort or Protection

In hot weather, dogs may dig holes to lie in the cool dirt. They may also dig to provide themselves with shelter from cold, wind, or rain, or to try to find water. Your dog may be digging for comfort or protection if:

- The holes are near foundations of buildings, large shade trees, or a water source.
- Your dog doesn't have a shelter or his shelter is exposed to the hot sun or cold winds.
- Your dog is lying in the holes he digs.

Recommendations

Provide your dog with the comfort or protection he seeks:

- Provide an insulated doghouse. Make sure it affords protection from wind and sun.
- If your dog still prefers a hole in the ground, try providing an "approved digging area" as described above. Make sure the allowed digging area is in a spot that is protected from the elements.
- Provide plenty of fresh water in a bowl that can't be tipped over.

Related topics at *www.petsforlife.org*

- The Canine Escape Artist
- Using Aversives to Modify Your Dog's Behavior

This information provided for you by

Seeking Attention

Any behavior can become attention-getting behavior if the dog learns that he receives attention for engaging in it. (Even punishment is a form of attention.) Your dog may be digging to get attention if:

- He digs in your presence.
- His other opportunities for interaction with you are limited.

Recommendations

- Don't give your dog attention for digging. Remember, even punishment is attention.
- Make sure your dog has sufficient time with you on a daily basis. That way, he doesn't have to resort to "misbehaving" to get your attention.

Seeking Escape

Dogs may escape to get to something, to get somewhere, or to get away from something. Your dog may be digging to escape if:

- He digs along the fence line.
- He digs under the fence.

Recommendations

Use the following methods to keep your dog in the yard while you work on the behavior modifications described in our handout "The Canine Escape Artist."

- Bury chicken wire at the base of the fence. Be sure to roll the sharp edges away from your yard.
- Place large rocks, partially buried, along the bottom of the fence line.
- Bury the bottom of the fence one to two feet below the surface.
- Lay chain-link fencing on the ground (anchored to the bottom of the fence) to make it uncomfortable for your dog to walk near the fence.

Regardless of the Reason for Digging, We Don't *Recommend*

- Punishment after the fact. This will not address the cause of the behavior, and in fact it will worsen any digging that's motivated by fear or anxiety. Punishment may also cause anxiety in dogs who aren't currently fearful.
- Staking a dog near a hole he's dug or filling the hole with water. These techniques address neither the cause of the behavior nor the act of digging.

Finally, if you've tried all these suggestions and still can't solve your dog's digging problem, then keep him indoors with you, and be sure to supervise your dog during bathroom breaks.

Adapted from material originally developed by applied animal behaviorists at the Dumb Friends League, Denver, Colorado.
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