



Banbury-Bedrock Bull Terriers

Chewers and Diggers

by Mary Remer

Barking, sniffing, digging, chewing, tail wagging to name a few are all characteristically canine behaviors and as such are normal for the species. Two of these traits that draw particularly negative regard from the human perspective are chewing and digging. The reflexive response of most humans is to punish the dog for offensively digging up the new rose garden or chewing a new definition to the word Chippendale on the dining room chairs. BTs with their powerful tank like bodies can be proficient diggers and, of course, with their jaws of steel it does not take them long to reconfigure your woodwork, furniture, vinyl and/or linoleum flooring. Plastics are also popular demolition material.

Why do our dogs dig and chew? Triggers that can result in digging include a genetic urge, boredom and stress. Sensory deprivation, such as when a dog can smell something but cannot see it or can see an object of attraction but cannot get to it, can also be a trigger. Digging can also produce a safe hiding place for a treasure as well as create a cool resting area. As for chewing, it begins with pups as a way to explore their world. There is both mental and physical satisfaction in chewing for pups with painful gums during teething. Adult dogs chew as a stress and/or boredom release and because the jaws and gums need exercise. Curiously the worst stage of chewing is not during teething but rather between the seventh and tenth months. The reason for this is that the last bone to grow on the dog is the mandible (lower jaw bone) and during this time the dog has a physiological need to chew. Consider how many bully pups have perfect bites at six months but by ten months the bite has slipped to undershot. Consider also the angel pup who has been being left loose without incident in the kitchen area since the age of six months when nobody's home. One day when Angel is around 7 or 8 months old the family comes home to surprise – a whole new serrated look to the chair legs or cupboards. As with digging, chewing can result from scent stimulation as well as sensory deprivation.

Both chewing and digging are self-rewarding as well as self-perpetuating activities. If the puppy learns early on that digging and chewing are unrestricted and fun activities they can develop into monster behaviors. Management of digging and chewing, not extinguishing the behaviors, is the appropriate response. Teaching your puppy what, where and when to dig and chew is the task. Start early, lay a good foundation. Do not wait for your puppy to dig in inappropriate places or chew inappropriate objects. Create a dig zone; there are a variety of ways. You can select an area of the yard and rope it off so there are clear boundaries. Till the soil so it's soft and diggable. Sand can be added to the soil for good drainage. You could construct a simple four-sided area with 2 x 4s. Baby pools can be filled with a dirt/sand combination. Put holes in the bottom of the pool for drainage. The location of the zone is important. It should not be in a heavy traffic area nor should it be in an isolated area where the dog would be unlikely to go. If you have a dog that seeks cool, shady places try and accommodate that desire in placement of the dig zone.

Once the dig zone is in place it's time for your puppy to learn how to use it. Begin by gathering up some favorite treats and toys. Kong toys swirled on the inside with peanut butter or cream cheese and then stuffed with treats make an exciting, indestructible find. Initially, put the objects of attraction just below the surface while your puppy is watching, and then with an encouraging "DIG", "GO DIG" or "FIND" start the game. It will not take many repetitions before you will be able to hide the treats and toys out of sight from your pup and he will respond eagerly to the cue. You can also leave the treasures to be found so the dig zone becomes a desired area to check out. Remember to reinforce your puppy with enthusiastic cheerleading for the activity of digging in the dig zone. Reinforcement will increase the likelihood of appropriate digging. If you catch your puppy digging in the wrong place, redirect to the dig zones. Keep in mind prevention is a foundation for success so it is important your puppy be supervised when he is in the yard to insure his learning to dig only in the dig zone. Adult dogs can also be trained to use a dig zone. If your dog is already digging in undesirable locations put his stool in the holes. This will serve as a deterrent to digging in that location.

Set your puppy up for success by providing the right environment, the right toys/bones for chewing – all done in a time appropriate way. Start the day your puppy comes home using judgment and jurisdiction. Even though he looks soooooo cute walking around with your Reebok in his mouth, is this a behavior that you want in the future? From the minute you bring your puppy home give him acceptable objects to chew that he enjoys. Limit access to non-chewable items. Rotate toys and bones so that 4 or 5 are available at any one time. Be sure the toys and bones you use are "jaws of steel" safe. Cow hooves and pigs ears and some rawhides are of questionable safety as pieces can break off and become lodged in the throat or between teeth. Further, they are often treated with formaldehyde and/or arsenic as a preservative. These are not healthy substances for your puppy to ingest. Fresh shinbones with thick walls and without joints are available from your butcher and are good pacifiers. One your puppy has gotten the marrow out; you can stuff the bone with yummys like peanut butter and bread, cream cheese and bread, liverwurst and bread. Stuffed kong toys, as well as some of the interactive toys such as Buster Cubes and Treat balls are indestructible, safe toys. Cressite makes durable rubber products. Nylabones can be used but need constant checking for wear. Some pups will become possessive over such toys and bones and it is teach imperative to your puppy to drop or give for a treat or object of equal value. As with digging, supervision is a critical component to creating an appropriate chewer. If you are unable to supervise, be sure your puppy is in a safe and puppy proofed zone such as a crate, an x-pen, or gated off area.

If your puppy or dog is a digger or a chewer, think of it as a necessary behavior that should not be suppressed. Teach them to dig where it is appropriate and chew what is appropriate. Keep in mind that lack of physical and psychological stimulation caused by long periods of confinement as well as boredom and loneliness can initiate undesirable presentations of these normal canine behaviors. Develop a positive relationship with your puppy utilizing good management skills.