



Digging... construction or destruction? It's all in the eye of the beholder

People plant gardens, excavate foundations for homes and build freeways, all activities we might define as human "digging." However, if these activities were done in inappropriate places, we might define them as destructive behaviors. As natural as our digging needs are to us, dogs have digging habits with very similar goals. Unfortunately, their digging activity is not often acceptable when living with their human families.

Dogs dig to occupy their time and to react to underground noises and scents. They bury objects and dig "routes to China" to fit the bill. To conserve heat in the winter or to disperse heat in the summer, dogs often dig holes in the soil to use as a bed. If the reward is greater on the other side of a wall or fence, a hole dug under and out is the answer to get you places in a hurry. Digging in soil and playing with roots that fight back are entertaining and the digging becomes self-reinforcing. The truth is that digging is a natural behavior, one that is at best controlled rather than eliminated.

Trying to eliminate digging behavior with punishment is ineffective. Dogs only relate to events that happen seconds after a behavior, so delayed punishment will be misinterpreted. Physical punishment will only cause the dog to avoid digging when you are around. The old remedy of filling the hole with water and dunking the dog's head in it is not only inhumane, but puts the dog at risk for injuries.

We can manage digging behavior if we try to understand why our dog is doing it and that it is a normal need. We know how enjoyable it is for a child to play with sand and we would not hesitate to provide a sandbox for them. A fenced sand digging pit can be set up for the dog stocked with treat filled Kong toys, bones and other play objects and the dog can be encouraged to play in this spot and praised for digging there. If this is not possible, the dog needs to be supervised when outside and redirected to appropriate play with a tennis ball or Frisbee for example. If your dog is digging to cool off, provide a child's wading pool or a shady spot for your dog to use. If a dog must be left outside, an appropriate kennel should be provided that conforms to the legal requirements for this type of shelter. A dog that digs to escape must be monitored when brought outside. Digging behavior can also be controlled with increased human interaction in play and increased physical activity. It is essential for all dogs to receive daily exercise in the form of walks, runs or fetch games. There is no excuse for not getting dogs out for a walk, even if they are exuberant dogs. A Gentle Leader head collar can get you back in control of your dog and get them outside to burn off energy that leads to undesirable behaviors such as digging.

To control digging we need to be reminded that dogs dig to provide entertainment, shelter and a way of passage or escape for themselves, behaviors that often parallel human needs. We can redirect this activity by understanding the reasons for digging and provide solutions rather than punishment for this behavior.