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Experts share top tips for puppy-proofing your home

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Dog trainer Heidi Palmer McNeil, of Pooch Pawsitive, with Nash, a 15-week-old golden retriever.

From ripping down curtains to eating through throw pillows, we've all heard horror stories about puppies wreaking havoc on homes. While dogs can do some serious damage to belongings — especially if they are left un- or under supervised — the typical home is also filled with things that could potentially endanger these new family members.

Taking a proactive approach from the beginning can help keep your dog safe and your house intact, said Heidi Palmer McNeil, certified dog trainer and owner of Pooch Pawsitive. Prevention and positive reinforcement are two important strategies, she added.

“Remember that they're pups and they don't come in knowing what the human rules are,” she said. “It's up to us to teach them how to live in our world. If you set the ground rules in the beginning, they'll be all set later in life.”

Readying for arrival

Experts recommend doing a thorough inspection of your living space before a new pup sets a paw through the door.

“Get on your knees and crawl through your house,” said Karen Perusek, certified dog trainer and owner of Courteous Canine. “That's the level they are going to be looking at. When you do that, you start noticing things like the cords for your DVR box and how fun the curtains look from that perspective.”

She suggests moving or removing items that you don't want the dog to get at (curtains, shoes, remote controls) by closing doors or putting up gates to keep them out of the area, or, if necessary, making the room off-limits.

“The rule is, if it's on the floor, it's fair game for the puppy,” Palmer McNeil said. “If you don't want your dog to eat it, don't put it on the floor.”

Crate training/house privileges

Trainers recommend first starting the dog out with limited house privileges and gradually extending them.

“The sure way to guarantee that your dog will chew everything is to let him have run of the house,” Palmer McNeil said.

Crate training is essential. “The crate is used to help house train the puppy and it's also going to become his little safe place for him to hang out when he wants to check out of the action of the house,” she said. “Put it in an area where he can see what is going on but is not in the middle of the action.”

When the dog is outside of the crate, it's a good idea to use gates or an exercise pen to confine him to a safe, small area at first. Many people use their kitchens for this purpose because they are places where families tend to congregate and usually have easy-to-clean floors, which is helpful if the dog is not yet housetrained, said Alexandra Morgan, certified dog trainer and owner of Alexandra Morgan's Animal School in Warren.

Then, over time, expose the dog to other areas of the home. “Start him out small so he earns privileges in the house, then slowly give him another room,” Palmer McNeil said. “You want to be with him every time you introduce him to a new area.”

Owners often feel bad about confining dogs, Perusek said, but it is a smart strategy because it's much easier to allow dogs into new rooms than stop them from going into ones they are already familiar with.

“They start to get the idea: When people are cooking, I sit in my pen. Then, after dinner, if I behave, we get to hang out in the living room,” she said.

When the dog is allowed outside the confined area, he or she should always be supervised.

“If people say, wow, he ate my whole couch, well, you can’t devour a whole couch in the time it takes to do a load of laundry,” Perusek said. “That’s really someone who goes to work and leaves the dog unsupervised.”

Chewing

The first thing to know about chewing is that it is normal and natural dog behavior, Morgan said.

It’s up to the humans to deter the dogs from noshing on things such as shoes and chair legs and direct them toward safe, appropriate chew toys.

“Puppies are in the oral investigatory stage usually starting at three weeks old and that doesn’t end until they are between one and four years old,” Morgan said.

She suggests providing the dog with a variety of chew toys with different consistencies. “Many dogs need toys to chew on that are fairly hard and resistant, while others like rubbery consistencies,” she said.

Palmer McNeil recommends marrow bones and KONG brand dog toys because the bouncy, rubber structure can be filled with dog food or peanut butter.

“Redirect them from the things you don’t want them to chew on to a legal chew toy,” she said. “They learn, this is a good thing to play with.”

Electrical wires and cords are particularly dangerous. Unsupervised dogs can get tangled in them or, if they bite through them, possibly electrocuted.

If the puppy is chewing on something you cannot move or put away, such as cabinets or the corner of the dishwasher, Morgan suggests spraying it with a taste deterrent such as a bitter apple or bitter lime spray (available in most pet stores and online). If that doesn’t work—and it often doesn’t—try wiping the item with a small amount of strong mouthwash, she said.

“It’s worth a try, but a lot of times you’ll see them make ugly faces but they’ll still chew because the reward of the chew is stronger than the bad taste,” she said.

Another rule: If your dog is acting up, chewing or otherwise, he or she is most likely bored.

“Most of the time, they have all this energy and they’re looking for something to do,” Palmer McNeil said. “The trick is to get them tired with exercise or give them something that’s OK for them to play with.”

The kitchen

One of the main things to pay attention to in the kitchen is the trash. Either invest in a trash can with a lid or place the basket in a cabinet that closes.

“A lot of it is simple stuff,” Perusek said. “It really comes down to managing the environment.”

Certain foods, including chocolate, grapes and raisins, can be harmful or deadly to dogs if ingested, so it is important to store them in a safe place, as well as train pets not to jump on counters and tables (easier said than done, of course).

“The biggest risk is dogs who learn to steal food off counters,” Perusek said. “That just goes back to supervising the dog when he is out of the confinement area.”

Trainers also recommend teaching dogs to respond to commands such as “Leave it” when you see them eyeing food on a table or counter.

The yard

Things to be mindful of in the yard include making sure the dog is not exposed to toxic substances such as weed killers or lawn chemicals, Morgan said.

“Don’t use them at all or use them with great caution,” she said. “[Puppies] investigate everything with their mouths and have no sense of the fact that these things could be dangerous.”

She also suggests not letting dogs watch you garden because their natural instinct is to dig the plants right up.

If your dog is digging at the carpet or in your petunia beds, instead direct him to an appropriate place in the yard to dig. Another option favored by trainers? Filling up a kiddie pool with sand, toys and treats and inviting him to paw through it.

“That keeps them busy for hours,” Morgan said.

- Alexandra Morgan’s Animal School, (401) 434-3687, alexandramorgan.com
- Courteous Canine, (401) 954-2699, yourcourteouscanine.com
- Pooch Pawsitive, (401) 714-5652, poochpawsitive.com
- All offer puppy training classes and other dog-related training services at various R.I. locations.

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