

LIFE/Home

Halting pet damage

By Christian Toto
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Helene Ross figured she could easily incorporate her new puppy, Merlot, into her Columbia, Md., home. A couple of weeks later, she called in a professional for help.

It takes more than teaching a dog or cat some new tricks to make it feel at home — and to keep said home in pristine condition.

Man's best friend often isn't kind to valuables, as any puppy owner can attest, and cats might view everything in sight as a potential scratching post.

Ms. Ross, whose Maltese puppy is 6 months old, says her dog has been gnawing at her wicker kitchen table almost from Day One.

"The chewing is absolutely uncontrollable. He started first on the

Training, gadgets protect valuables

chair legs," Ms. Ross says.

She quickly hired dog trainer Howard Weinstein to help Merlot understand which parts of the house were off limits.

Now she's using baby gates and a dog crate to confine her pet until he understands how a grown-up dog should behave.

Some dog owners set up booby traps around items a pet shouldn't be near — for example, using a stack of empty aluminum cans that make a crashing sound if moved or the Snappy

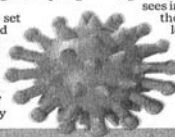
Trainer, a device that snaps like a mousetrap to startle pets from investigating where they shouldn't.

Mr. Weinstein, author of "Puppy Kisses Are Good for the Soul" and owner of Day-One Dog Training in Elkridge, Md., says a puppy should be considered the equivalent of a 2-year-old child.

"They're very curious and interested in everything," Mr. Weinstein says. "They don't know that things are hazardous to them. Everything goes into their mouths."

A good way to see what a puppy sees in your home is to sit on the floor and literally look at the world from the dog's vantage point, he says.

"They see things we don't even know are there," he says.



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Howard Weinstein has been helping train Merlot, a 6-month-old Maltese owned by Helene Ross of Columbia, Md. A baby gate keeps Merlot from exploring where he shouldn't.



Helene Ross of Columbia, Md., gives an order to her puppy, Merlot, under the supervision of trainer Howard Weinstein.

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Dogs often view power cords, shoes and houseplants as potential chew toys, so pet owners must be diligent in keeping them out of dogs' reach.

Keep a playful pup at bay with a series of dog toys — a variety of rawhides, stuffed animals and squeaky treats is a good blend, he says.

"They do get bored," he says of the average dog.

No matter how many tempting toys are left on the floor, a puppy or dog still may chew the wrong item. The key, Mr. Weinstein says, remains in supervision.

"Loss," he says, "doesn't need to be part of the equation. Major destruction is our fault, not the dog's."

A chew-happy dog can do plenty of damage, but a new cat or kitten poses its own complications.

Laura Goodman, a co-founder and board member of the Feline Foundation of Greater Washington, says a new cat should be greeted by unscented litter and a home free of temptations.

"Take tablecloths off of tables in case they want to play with it and pull things down," Ms. Goodman says.

Dangling power cords can look like cat toys, so they should be tied up and put out of sight, she adds.

The cat owner should examine the kinds of plants around the house and research whether any pose a poison threat to pets. The Cat Fanciers Association offers a list of poisonous plants at www.cfa.org/articles/plants.html.

Another danger lurks with unsecured cleaning products in either the main living area or in the

garage, she says.

"Most cats can open cabinet doors with their paws," she warns. A few licks of sweet-tasting antifreeze in the garage can spell curtains for a cat.

"Just a tiny amount can kill them," she says.

While dogs need a steady supply of chew toys to satiate their cravings, cats demand acceptable surfaces they can scratch and claw.

Ms. Goodman recommends buying a tall post of some sort that lets a cat luxuriate with a long, vertical stretch.

"It should be at least 30 inches tall. Even a tiny kitten will grow quickly," she says. "It's good for them orthopedically."

A new kitten shouldn't be given the entire house to play in at first, she warns.

"Too much space can be very daunting for a cat in a new environment. At least until the cat gives signs of being relaxed, bring it into a spare room or a bathroom," she says.

Some potential pet owners adopt older dogs and cats from rescue organizations that save pets from being euthanized. These more mature pets often are house-trained and may know an array of valuable tricks. That doesn't mean potential problems should be ignored.

Victoria Schade, owner of Good Dog! Training in Falls Church, says an older dog should be considered an unknown quantity until the owner gets to know it.

"Just because you have a dog that's a year old, don't assume he's fully house-trained," Ms. Schade says.

"Don't say: 'Well, he's old

enough. He should know how to hold it.' It's not always the case."

The pet owner also should prevent a dog from chomping on its sleeping pad or bed.

"If he views it as a giant chew toy, you've got a problem on your hands," she says. "People don't realize the need to chew is so strong. If you don't provide appropriate outlets, they'll find others."

Mr. Weinstein says the biggest mistake pet owners make is letting pets enjoy too much unsupervised time too soon.

"Dogs are puppies until they're 2. They're growing and learning. Freedom should be conditional and limited at first," he says.

The average dog won't grow much more after its first birthday, but a dog's behavior can change dramatically as it heads into its "teen" years.

"Sometimes they show an interest in chewing things they weren't interested in before. That's when the sofa cushions get destroyed," he says.

If a puppy gets through its first two years without destroying furniture or other valuables, it's likely that the pet will never engage in such behavior.

Should a puppy misbehave when it's young, that's something the pup won't soon forget.

"They remember when they did it. It was the most fun they've had in ages. They don't care they were scolded," he says.

Ms. Ross says she hopes for a day when Merlot has the run of the house.

"I hope to get him a cute little bed in my room," she says, "but I need to know when the chewing has stopped. Maybe in a year Merlot will be ready."

