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Dogs and Puppies Chew For a Number of Reasons, Learn to Properly Channel This Activity

Whether your puppy is teething, exercising its jaw or simply has a case of boredom- learn how to properly channel your dog or puppies need to chew.

Puppies are notorious for their ability to chew on anything and everything. If you're at all dog-savvy you know when you get a new puppy that despite your best efforts to manage and supervise, you're likely to lose at least one valuable personal possession to the razor-sharp implements known fondly as **puppy teeth**.

Puppies chew to explore their world as well as to relieve the pain and irritation of teething. What many dog owners don't seem to realize is that while puppies sooner or later get beyond the stage where they feel compelled to put their teeth on everything they see, mature dogs also need to chew to exercise their jaws, massage their gums, clean their teeth, and to relieve stress and boredom. It comes as an unpleasant surprise to many owners that chewing doesn't end at the age of six months when all of the dog's adult teeth are grown in.



Puppies should have a variety of chew items, of varying resistance, to help deal with their ever-changing baby teeth and gums. When their mouths are sore, they may seek out one type of chew, but then look for other items when feeling fine.

The wolf, ancestor and cousin to our dogs, chewed to survive. His meals weren't served to him as measured rations of kibble in a stainless steel bowl. Long ago, as a pack member, he used his strong teeth and jaws to bring down his prey. He chewed through tough moose hide to consume the life-sustaining flesh beneath. He crushed elk leg bones with powerful jaws and teeth to slurp up the rich, tasty marrow inside. He chewed to eat, to live.

Neither tens of thousand years of domestication nor a recent switch to processed foods have extinguished the adult dog's need and desire to chew. Many dogs continue a significant amount of vigorous adolescent chewing until the age of 18 to 24 months as those teeth continue to mature, and then still chew, but with somewhat less intensity, as they age.

Chewing is as basic a behavior to a **puppy** as a human baby sucking on a pacifier. Humans, as they grow, transition to sucking on thumbs, then lollipops, straws, sports bottles, and perhaps cigarettes. Dogs, like us, can learn to transition to appropriate objects for mature oral attention, but they never completely outgrow the need to gnaw. Given the opportunity, mature dogs will chew for as long as they live and have teeth to chew with.

Case in point: Katie, our 15-year-old Australian Kelpie who can barely hear, has difficulty walking, and whose vision is failing, still happily chews raw bones and chicken wings right alongside her younger packmates.

Building good chew habits

Puppies develop substrate preferences for elimination in the early months of their lives, and they similarly develop chew-object preferences. Hence the inadvisability of giving your old shoes or socks as chew toys.

If you give your baby dog the run of the house and he learns to chew on Oriental carpets, sofa cushions, and coffee table legs, you will likely end up with a dog who chooses to exercise his jaws and teeth on inappropriate objects for years to come. You'll find yourself crating him frequently even as an adult dog, or worse, exiling him to a lonely life in the backyard, where he can chew only on lawn furniture, loose fence boards, and the edges of your deck and hot tub.

Instead, focus your dog's fangs on approved chew toys at an early age and manage him well to prevent access to your stuff. In this way, he'll earn house privileges much sooner in life. By the end of his first year, you'll probably be able to leave him alone safely while you go out to dinner or shopping – or even while you're away at work.

As long as he still snags the occasional shoe, knick-knack, or other off-limits possession for a mid-day gnaw, it's too soon to give your dog unfettered freedom. When you're home, he needs to always be under your direct supervision. You may need to keep him on a leash or a tether, or simply close the door of the room you're in so he's shut in with you and can't wander into the parlor to shred your

grandmother's antique lace doily while your back is turned. If you're otherwise too occupied to supervise, put him in his crate or exercise pen to keep him out of trouble.

At the same time, supply him with "legal" chew objects to keep his needle-sharp puppy teeth appropriately occupied. Stuffed Kongs, Buster Cubes, and Busy Buddies are just a few of the many interactive toys available that can keep your dog's teeth and mind acceptably busy. If you consistently supply him with desirable and acceptable chew objects, he'll eventually develop a strong preference for chewing on those same objects. He will seek these items out when he feels the need to gnaw, and ultimately your personal possessions will be safe, even when your back is turned.



Puppies lose their "baby teeth" over a period of weeks, between three and six months of age. While the baby teeth are shedding and the adult teeth are erupting, the puppy's gums are likely to be irritated – and he'll urgently wish to chew.

Individually appropriate

Because different dogs chew with different levels of intensity, it is impossible to make definitive statements about which types of chew products are appropriate for your particular dog. The safety of chew objects such as rawhide, various bones, pig ears, and cow hooves is a hotly debated topic. Rope tugs are wonderful chew toys for some dogs, but others chew off and ingest the strings and risk serious gastrointestinal complications, even death.

Check with your own veterinarian and follow his/her recommendations regarding the use of these and other chew items for your dog. Regularly check the condition of any chew toys you do give your dog, and discard them when they begin to show signs of wear and tear.

One of the basic tenets of positive dog training is that it's much easier to teach the dog what to do rather than what not to do. If you program your dog's chew preferences early in life by consistently directing his attention – and teeth – to appropriate objects and preventing his access to inappropriate ones, you won't have to constantly tell him he's chewing on the wrong things.

Interactive toys can help here too. A stuffed Kong suspended just out of your dog's reach can keep him occupied and work off excess energy as he jumps and grabs at the tempting prize. Instead of giving him his bowl of food in the morning, fill the Buster Cube with his kibbles and make him work for his meal by pushing cube around to make the food fall out. He won't have the time, energy, or desire to shred your grandmother's antique afghan if he's out "hunting" for his breakfast!

Note: Some destructive chewing and other related inappropriate behaviors are a result of isolation distress or separation anxiety rather than "normal" chewing. Such chewing is often – but not exclusively – directed toward door and window frames, and occurs only outside of the owner's presence, by a dog who shows signs of stress at the signs of his owner's pending departure. Separation anxiety dogs often don't crate well either, which makes managing the destructive behavior even more challenging. If you think your dog's chewing is related to separation anxiety or isolation distress, you'll need to work with a qualified, positive dog training professional to modify the behaviors.

The trading post

You can reduce the risk of damage to occasional ill-gotten items by teaching your pup to exchange toys for treats, using something he loves that he's allowed to have, such as a favorite chew toy or a food-stuffed Kong.

The key to this game is he learns that if he gives something up, he gets something better in return and he gets the original thing back as well. Two rewards for the price of one! Then, when he has a forbidden object, he's more likely to bring it to you to trade than to drag his prize to his cave under the dining room table for a leisurely chew. The rare occasion that he doesn't get "the thing" back won't be enough to overcome the programming you've done by playing the "trade" game with him frequently.

In order for this to work, you have to stop playing "chase the puppy" when he grabs the sofa cushion or some other forbidden object. This is often an attention-getting behavior; he's learned that grabbing "your" toys and dashing off with them initiates a rousing play session.

Here's what you do:

1. Offer him his well-stuffed Kong and say, "Take it!" Have him on a leash if you think he'll run off with it.
2. Give him a little while to get fully engaged in chewing, and then say "Give!" or "Trade!" in a cheerful tone of voice and offer him a handful of irresistible treats, such as small bits of chicken or cheese.
3. Hold the treats under his nose and let him sniff. It may take him several seconds to think about it, but eventually he should drop his Kong and start eating the treats. Don't let him gulp them! Hold the tidbits so he can only take them one by one.
4. When he drops the Kong, say, "Yes!"

5. While he is still nibbling, reach down with your other hand and pick up the toy.
6. Let him nibble a bit longer, then offer him the Kong again.
7. Repeat the exercise several times. Then end the game by giving him back his Kong and letting him chew to his heart's content.
8. Play this game at every opportunity, whenever he's engaged in chewing on his toys on his own, or whenever you feel like initiating the game, until he'll give up his chew object easily on your "give" cue.

Troubleshooting

What if the game doesn't always go as smoothly as you might like? Here are some of the challenges you may face:

- Your dog may not be willing to drop his toy in exchange for the treats in your hand. Try dropping the treats on the floor in a little Hansel-and-Gretel-trail. Lots of dogs are more willing to give up their valued possession if the treats are within easy reach on the floor. Then, while he is following the trail to your hand that's still holding a reservoir of treats, pick up the Kong with your other hand.
- Your dog may lose interest in his toy after he realizes you have yummy treats in your hand. Try using less valuable treats, or a more valuable chew toy. Or simply play the game when he happens to be chewing on one of his toys.
- Your dog may be a resource guarder. If he growls, snaps, or even stiffens and looks angry when you try to trade with him, you should STOP practicing this exercise and seek the help of a qualified and positive training professional to help you resolve the resource guarding challenge. (For more on resource guarding, see "[Eliminate Aggressive Dog Guarding Behaviors](#)," September 2001.)

Meanwhile, supervise him very closely to prevent his access to forbidden objects so you don't put yourself at risk for being bitten because you have to take something away from him.

Leave it

You can also teach your dog to respond to your cue to leave something alone before he sinks his sabers gum-deep into a treasured possession. To teach "leave it," have your dog on leash in front of you. Show him a tasty treat, tell him "Leave it!", and let him see you place it under your shoe. Freeze-dried liver cubes work well for this; they are high-value for the dog, but firm enough that they aren't easily squished under your foot.

Your dog will probably dig, claw, and even chew at your foot to try to get the treat. Let him. This is an exercise in patience for you as well as an exercise in "Leave it!" for him. *Be sure to wear durable shoes for this exercise.* Sandals may leave you with bloody toes, and patent leather will be permanently scratched. Your dog may give up easily when he realizes he can't get the treat, or he may be very persistent. Either way, you're just going to wait for him to give up. The instant he looks away from your foot, "mark" the

moment with the click of a clicker or word such as “Yes!” and feed him a very tasty treat. If he continues to look away from your foot, keep clicking and treating at a high rate of reinforcement – lots of clicks and treats. If he returns his attentions to the treat under your foot, just wait for him to look away again. Do not repeat the cue. When he looks away again, click and treat – again, at a high rate of reinforcement.

When he can control his urge to maul your foot for at least five seconds, carefully move your foot off the treat. If he tries to grab it, simply cover it back up with your foot. You don’t need to repeat the “Leave it” cue. In a surprisingly short time, he’ll ignore the treat on the floor. Now pick it up, show it to him again, repeat the “Leave it!” cue and try it under your foot again, still with a high rate of reinforcement. Remember to keep your cue cheerful; you’re not trying to intimidate him away from the forbidden object; you’re just giving him information.

When he’s reliably ignoring the treat, you can move a few inches away from it. Don’t get too confident! The farther you move from the treat, the more likely he is to think it’s okay for him to have it. Take it slow. Set him up to succeed, and in time you’ll be able to tell him “Leave it” and leave the object unattended.

You can translate this exercise to real life as soon as your dog understands to look away from the object when he hears the “Leave it!” cue. Set some tempting items on the floor, put him on leash, and walk him past the objects, just out of reach. The instant he looks at an object, say “Leave it!” in a cheerful tone, and stand still. He may stare at and strain toward the object. Just wait. When he gives up and looks away from the forbidden object, click and treat. Then continue toward the next object.

When he’ll do this reliably without the leash tightening at all, you’re ready to try it off leash. Then, as you supervise your pup’s antics, if you see him coveting an inappropriate object, just say, “Leave it!” in that cheerful tone, and be ready to click and treat when he turns back toward you.

Once you’ve taught your dog the “trade” and “leave it” games, the rest is up to you. Of course, you’ll continue to supervise him closely to minimize his access to forbidden objects and redirect his attention when you see him covet an inappropriate one.

If, however, he does happen to find something he’s not supposed to have, odds are he’ll bring it to you to exchange for something better. Next time you see your dog with Aunt Ida’s antique lace doily in his mouth, instead of going into “Omigod the puppy has the doily!” panic mode, walk to the refrigerator, take out a bag of his favorite treats, and calmly initiate the trade game. You’ll be surprised by how easy it is.



There are many toys that are designed to have food smeared or stuffed into their crevices, encouraging the dog to take his time chewing.

Adult chewing

On occasion, an adult dog who has been trustworthy with his chewing habits may suddenly surprise you with an oral foray into the forbidden.

This may be a stress response to something environmental happening in your absence, such as a burglar trying to break into your home, loud equipment working in the street in front of your house, or stray dogs romping through your yard. Sometimes even something like a compelling need to urinate or defecate can stress a well-trained dog into inappropriate chewing.

If you can determine the nature of the stressor and control or remove the cause, your dog should quickly revert to his prior good chewing behavior. He might also need a refresher course in the crate, after a veterinary exam to rule out possible medical causes. (Anytime there's a significant behavior change in an adult dog it's important to rule out – or treat – any possible medical contributors to the undesirable behavior.)

A return to inappropriate chewing may be a result of inactivity and pent-up energy. Perhaps the weather's been bad or your workload extra heavy, curtailing your normal exercise sessions with your canine companion. That energy has to go somewhere – and for some dogs, it goes right to their jaws. The solution here is a renewed commitment to provide adequate exercise, with the addition, perhaps, of

mental exercise into your dog's daily routine. (See "[How to Play Tug-of-War With Your Dog](#)," October 2004, for a list of activities for low-mobility games.)

You may also have misjudged your dog's maturity, giving him a little too much freedom a little too soon. When we went to Australia last October for two weeks, I left detailed instructions with our pet-sitter, including a caution that Bonnie, our youngest pack member at 18 months and the only one still routinely crated in our absence, should be given no more than a couple of hours of house-freedom at a time, maximum.

We returned home to discover that particular instruction had somehow gotten lost in the shuffle; the sitter had been crating Bonnie only at night. As a result of too much freedom and less exercise than normal, our little black Scottie/Corgi mix discovered the joys of nibbling on various household objects, including the corner of the plastic dog food bin.

Six-plus months of strict remedial supervision and management later, we're now, again, able to leave her uncrated for up to two hours at a stretch. If I leave the house for longer than that, she's back in her crate. I probably could leave her for longer periods, but I'm a firm believer in erring on the side of caution.

Finally, a well-run positive training class can assist in resolving behavior problems, chewing and otherwise, by helping you and your dog learn to communicate more clearly with each other. The better you understand how his mind works, and the better he understands what you expect of him, the stronger the relationship between the two of you. In the end, it's the strength of this relationship that will carry you through the challenges of chewing and other dog caretaking adventures, and allow you to experience the joys and rewards of sharing your life with a canine companion.

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