

Something to Chew On

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Chewing is as natural to a dog as sleeping. It is a basic instinctive behavior that requires no apparent previous learning or forethought. And yet, it is one of the behaviors for which a dog gets into the most trouble with its human companions. Puppies begin chewing either during or soon after nursing. In its earliest stages, chewing is an offshoot of the sucking behavior that stimulates milk flow from the mother. It begins as an exploratory behavior, and soon develops into feeding behavior. Wild canids' diets consist mostly of animal flesh. This necessitates a well-developed chewing behavior for survival. Our domesticated friends, in contrast, eat a ground, processed, and extruded diet, and therefore do not require the same level of chewing skill. They do, however, have the same instincts. It is important to realize that whether we like it or not, dogs will chew. Rather than try to fight a primal instinct, it would be far better to try to direct this behavior in a constructive (or at least less destructive) way.

Puppies should be taught to discriminate between appropriate and inappropriate objects at the earliest opportunity. One of the earliest and most common objects a puppy will chew is the human hand. While this is perfectly natural, and sometimes "cute, it is imperative that it be discouraged at the earliest stages. Puppies that are allowed to play in this way will be more likely to mouth people's hands during later life. My favorite way to discourage this behavior is to immediately grasp the closed muzzle of the puppy and give a verbal command such as "No biting! The object is absolutely not to hurt the puppy, but rather to link something the puppy does not appreciate (holding the muzzle shut or grasping the bottom jaw) with the biting behavior. In this way, after several hundred lessons, the puppy will choose not to bite since it doesn't appreciate the consequences. Another popular object of most puppies' desires is the leg of your antique chair. From a dog's perspective, wood, fabric, and carpet provide just the perfect amount of challenge. Unfortunately, if left undisciplined, this can obviously lead to considerable damage. Painting a thin coat of hot pepper sauce (such as Tabasco) on the object is usually sufficient to quell this taste for furniture, electric cords, door trim etc.

Remember what I said previously. A dog will chew no matter what. Rather than constantly fighting this losing battle, you will be far more successful by attempting to re-direct the behavior. Chew toys (bones, ropes, balls, discs, cubes, etc.) were designed just for that purpose. There are many thousand of them available. Ideally they should be relatively indestructible, large enough so as not to be swallowed whole, have enough "give" to provide sufficient stimulation and "mouth appeal," and have the ability to be cleaned periodically (primarily for the owner's benefit). Some of the more popular brands include: Kong™, Nylabone™, Dentabone™, Cressite™. (There are many other excellent brands available as well.) Toys made of destructible materials such as thin rubber toys, small balls, sneakers, socks, etc., are not a good choice for the average dog since they may be ingested and lead to intestinal irritation or obstruction.

This leads to one of the most controversial areas of appropriate chew toys, processed animal parts. I am referring to any of the forms of hide, tail, ear, snout, hoof, bone, or other body parts. There seems to be two divergent schools of thought. There are those who absolutely, unequivocally feel that dogs should not be given these objects due to the risk of intestinal obstruction. Their counterparts feel that these are perfectly acceptable outlets for chewing. Here's my feeling after fifteen years of veterinary practice. Dogs who are given this type of chew toy from early puppyhood (when they are incapable of swallowing them whole) learn to chew these objects thoroughly, and rarely have trouble with them

throughout life. Dogs who lack the experience as puppies, on the other hand, often tear off large pieces and swallow them whole. This is when the problem arises. I have, admittedly, surgically removed this type of obstruction from two dogs in fifteen years. On the other hand, I have removed literally hundreds of other objects, so relatively speaking the risk is fairly small. Again, the key seems to be early exposure. Sterilized bones are very popular, and are generally safe, but can occasionally result in worn and broken teeth.

The larger issue with this type of object is that while they are toys in our eyes, they are perceived as food objects to a dog. As a result, they are often jealously guarded from other members of the pack (both canine and human). They can stimulate food guarding or aggression even in the nicest family dog. Reaching for, or even being in the vicinity of, a rawhide may trigger an aggressive attack from your dog. If you chose to use food objects as chew toys, it is best to supervise the dog. Remove the object if its size could be swallowed and pose a threat to your dog, or if your dog displays aggressive possessiveness with it. You may wish to avoid this whole category of chew toys all together just to be safe.

Chewing is an instinctive behavior with many advantages to the dog (keeping teeth clean, teething, stimulating digestion, providing activity, and exercise). By discouraging the chewing of dangerous or inappropriate objects, and redirecting the behavior to safe and beneficial objects, you and your dog can cohabit a little more peacefully.