

Chewing

Chewing is a natural and instinctual behavior that serves many purposes for pups and dogs. Pups chew because it facilitates teething and provides relief during their teething stages. One frequently asked question is “When will my pup outgrow their chewing?” The answer is the dogs do not ever outgrow chewing! All that occurs is when they have their adult teeth, the chewing related to “teething” ceases. However, there are many other reasons why pups and dogs chew. Probably the most basic reason is that chewing is healthy for the dogs and they instinctually know this. Chewing keeps their teeth clean, keeps their teeth and jaws strong, and is basically a very self-gratifying behavior somewhat akin to barking and digging. Dogs are innately driven to engage in certain behaviors that instinctually fulfill many basic and species related needs.

The dogs need to have strong and healthy teeth and jaws. Why? They have to be able to kill and eat “prey” for sustenance. Dogs have to be able to protect themselves from other dogs and animals. If their teeth are not healthy and strong, they will not be able to eat to live. If their jaws do not remain strong, they will not be able to kill prey to eat. And just as importantly, they will not be able to protect and defend themselves and their pack. Our Fire Departments have a tool called the “jaws of life”; the dogs’ jaws are truly related to their survival and life. Chewing is a self-gratifying, self-reinforcing behavior because it is connected to this primordial aspect of being a dog.

When we are responsible owners, our dogs do not have to worry about securing their own food or protecting and defending themselves or their pack (except in unusual circumstances). While we think our dogs should understand this, their innate survival instincts (and behaviors) remain intact. One example is when a dog is fed only soft food and is not provided with other chewing options to keep their teeth and jaws healthy and strong, the dog will fulfill their instinctual need to chew in other ways.

It is OUR responsibility to provide pups and dogs with acceptable ways to fulfill their instinctual need to chew. This means providing them with appropriate and necessary chew items. Even more importantly, we have to “pattern train” our dogs to what is acceptable and what is not acceptable (by our human terms) to chew on. They are not capable of discerning acceptable (by human terms) chew items on their own. Moreover, it is essential to realize that you are modifying an instinctual behavior and the modified behavior is actually contradictory to the basic nature of being a dog!

It is also important to note that dogs will chew for other reasons as well. Chewing can be a “calming” mechanism when the dogs are stressed and it can be a stress avoidance behavior. What I mean is when the dogs are stressed; they will often chew something (anything) with tremendous intensity to release their stress OR to be intently involved in another activity in order to “avoid” something that is unpleasant or untenable. Many dogs will chew when they are bored or are not getting proper mental, physical, and emotional stimulation and releases. Chewing is an instinctually driven behavior and innately self-gratifying and self-reinforcing. Consequently, when an important aspect of their life is lacking, they will fill that void by chewing, barking, digging, or a multitude of other behaviors.

When dogs investigate and explore their surroundings, they do so with their mouths and paws. Once they become intrigued by something, it is a natural progression of behavior for the dogs to end up chewing on that item. The “original” intent and action was to investigate and explore something, but ended up progressing to chewing on that item.

Dogs may chew on certain items due to a nutritional deficiency. They can be drawn to the organic or mineral elements of something such as wood, grass, mulch, and plants. The dogs will often be drawn to chew on items that have some other connection for them. For example, a dog may chew on clothing that has been worn (especially underwear), shoes, purses, or other personal effects belonging to certain members of their family.

Some people ask me why their dog always gets their clothing, shoes, purse, or other items and chews them up. This most frequently occurs when the owner is not watching (or paying attention to) the dog OR when the dog is home alone. Owners often think their dog is “making a statement” because they chose to chew something belonging to the owner. The fact is the dogs are drawn to items belonging to the people (pack members) they are closest to and feel safer and more secure with. The dog can start out licking or even chewing, but if the item is torn up or destroyed, it is only because the dog kept using their mouth and paws, as dogs will, and the result is the item gets torn up or destroyed. This is not because the dog is upset AT the person. Rather the dog is being “close and connected” with the person. Unfortunately, the result of this can often be something is chewed on or torn up because the dogs use their mouths. *[NOTE: Something being “torn up or destroyed” is our human perspective of what occurred and has no correlation to the dog’s perspective of what occurred. Also, recognize that “acceptable versus not acceptable” is completely YOUR human based determination and does not correlate to the canine perception and thought processes. A dog grasping this concept is only achieved through proper pattern training.]*

In line with this, dogs can be drawn to items that belong to (smell like) their owner when the dog senses or knows that person (their pack leader) is upset with them. Owners often think this is because the dog is “ticked off or mad” at them. If you are the pack leader, this is NOT at all what is happening. In fact, it is quite the reverse. When the dog feels they have displeased their pack leader, they will want to be as close to them as possible for security and since being close to you at that juncture is not good for them; their next best alternative is to be close to something of yours! The dog will likely end up licking and chewing the item because of the stress, anxiety, and/or insecurity they are feeling.

As for worn underwear, the dogs are drawn to this from both genders; but, often more so from the female owner, especially if the dog is a male. Keep in mind that we are always seen as dogs (albeit weird looking and sounding) and “pack members” to our dogs. Then, think about how dogs greet each other. They smell each other’s genitalia because this tells them so much. This is also why dogs often stick their nose in our “crotch” area. If you think about this, you will understand why the dogs are drawn to our underwear if given access to them. For women, you need to take extra care not to allow access to the trash where you place your used sanitary napkins or tampons because these items smell like a “bitch in season”. This is especially true if you have a male dog regardless of whether they are neutered or not.

Since all of this is normal and part of being a dog, you are asking “What to do, what to do, what to do?” The first step is to understand the reality of what “chewing” means to

the dogs. Once you truly grasp and understand this, you will have a whole new insight into HOW to handle chewing behaviors. The most crucial element is to keep anything and everything, which would or could be of interest, intrigue, or need to the dog, beyond their accessibility. This is the main step to “pattern training” your dog and offsets their natural, innate, and instinctual propensities. This means you will have to think about and view everything from their perspective. This is not much different than people have to do with toddlers.

Does this mean you will always have to keep books, shoes, or whatever beyond their reach and grasp? In most instances, you would not need to do this once the pup/dog has been patterned trained to what is acceptable and what is not acceptable (by your terms). However, there are some items that even the best trained dog will be drawn to. And for some dogs, there are certain items that they are just not able to eschew. This means a compromise, on your part, to help your dog be successful and to not cause damage to your possessions. Additionally, you have to be aware of the health issues that can result from your dog encountering and possibly ingesting one of these items.

While “pattern training” your dog to acceptable chew items, you need to be very observant. Whenever they attempt to chew on something you consider unacceptable, you need to divert them from that item to an appropriate item right then. You can not teach or train AFTER the fact. To be successful at this, you need to prevent or limit their access to unacceptable items and minimize your dog’s unacceptable “chewing options”, especially when you are not available to work on the pattern training.

It is always disturbing when people lament that their dog ate an entire bag of candy, a bottle of aspirin, other medication, or got into the trash and managed to eat paper towels, foil, or leftover food that made them ill. I know we can all make mistakes. While it takes only one time to cause illness, intestinal blockage, or death, when people say this has happened before, repeatedly, or frequently, I find this NOT acceptable or responsible.

Another common, but unacceptable error in judgment is to leave really enticing, fragrant, and palatable food items on the table or kitchen counters. Regardless of how well trained a dog is or if they have never tried to get at something like this or if the table or counter appears to be beyond their reach; you SHOULD NOT take any chance at all. The best trained dog can encounter something that will overwhelm their good training. Something can be too enticing one time when it has never been an issue before.

For many dogs, where there is food, there IS a way. Believe me, dogs WILL find a way to access something of a high ticket instinctual draw, even when you are certain there is no way the dog could ever manage to reach said item. I have heard stories when small dogs have actually managed to drag a chair to gain access something. Consider that dogs have incredible survival instincts and they can manage to “get at” food when it seems physically impossible from our perspective.

To leave a chair out from the table or a plate of food next to the table edge is again not acceptable or responsible. If something occurs as a result of this, it is NOT the dog’s error; it is the owner’s carelessness and poor judgment. The reality is that little Fluffy is a dog is a dog is a dog and WILL, more likely than not, fulfill what her instincts dictate at some point in her life.

It is also disturbing when a dog constantly gets into trouble for chewing up prized possessions of the owner. The dog pays a heavy price for their OWNER'S error. Can you imagine how stressful and disconcerting it is when the dogs are yelled at, hit, banished from the house, or punished in other ways because they chewed on something the owner considered unacceptable? I cannot even conceive of how much confusion and anxiety the dogs must feel when they truly have no clue what they possibly could have done to cause their pack leader's extreme displeasure or anger. Then consider what happens in the dog/dog world when a dog extremely displeases or angers their pack leader!

Do not interpret your dog's reaction to your displeasure or anger as remorse or guilt. While it may appear that way by human terms, this is not what is happening. Your dog is showing APPROPRIATE "deference and submission" to their pack leader (you), who is very upset with them. The dogs instinctually react this way in hopes that they will not be expelled from their pack or harshly dealt with within the pack. Your dog cannot feel remorse or guilt when they can't rationalize what they have done wrong! All the dog can do is exhibit a deferential or submissive behavior that has the best chance putting them back in the good graces of their pack leader.

How can a dog follow your rules when they do not have any true understanding or grasp of those rules? Remember, your rules are human rules and most often are contradictory to what it means to be "a dog"! In the dog/dog world, the pack leader's rules and communications ARE understood! Dogs will never understand "why" they should NOT use their mouths and chew because this is contradictory to their basic nature. It is not reasonable to expect dogs not to engage in a behavior that is innate and instinctual. It is not possible to make a dog not be a dog. All we can do is to "pattern train" them TO the modified behaviors we desire. And, the "desired" modified behaviors must satisfy their innate and instinctual needs. We have to pattern a "default" behavior that will override the original behavior. **You must ensure their success during the patterning phase of any behavior modification or development.**

If we leave something accessible to the dogs BEFORE we are certain they are reliable, then when they use their mouths it is OUR FAULT, not the dog's fault. And to be honest, allowing any dog access to food or things that have food smells on them is also OUR FAULT, not theirs. I do believe we can train the dogs to leave most "items" alone, IF we train them properly. However, we have to always be aware that certain things will exceed their ability to resist. This is exceedingly true of anything regarding food. For the dogs, food trumps "human rules". For example, if you have a napkin you wiped your mouth with after eating and you unthinkingly drop it in the trash basket beside your chair, even if your dog does not bother things in that trash basket, this will often be enough to entice them to do so.

SIDE NOTE: Dogs can have a condition called PICA. This is an abnormal desire, drive, or need to ingest unusual things. The list of items that dogs with pica can or will ingest is endless. Unfortunately, this is also why these dogs often end up getting extremely ill from something they ate or the ingested item causes an intestinal blockage which can end up requiring surgery. Needless to say, ingesting certain items can end up being life threatening. There are numerous causes for pica including nutritional deficiencies, neurological issues, obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD), stress and anxiety, and a myriad of other medical reasons. [NOTE: *If you suspect your dog may suffer from PICA,*

you would do well to see your Veterinarian or a Specialist. Many dogs with this condition can be helped with certain medications. Above all, be understanding. Recognize that this is something your dog has NO control over! If your dog has PICA, take extra precautions to limit your dog's access to anything you think they might or could ingest!]

Okay, now let's look at some more specific measures to help with chewing issues. The best place to start is with pups. Puppies WILL chew and older dogs that have never been taught what is acceptable and what is not acceptable...WILL CHEW!! Puppies absolutely will chew on just about anything due to their natural tendencies and their "teething". During their teething phases, chewing provides physical relief. Think about a child who is teething; we provide them with teething rings and take precautions to ensure they don't put unacceptable or unsafe things in their mouth. Teething infants will put just about anything in their mouth. Pups are no different! Infants will even 'gnaw' on your hand or fingers. For pups, they need teething items, too! They are just like infants in that they will chew/gnaw on anything available that will provide "teething relief". Also, infants and toddlers constantly put things in their mouths as part of their natural and normal exploration process. The only difference with the dogs is they continue to use their mouths as part of their natural and normal exploration, investigation, and interactive processes throughout their life.

Several approaches can help. Have plenty of safe chew toys available. PICK UP all items that are inviting to the pups UNTIL they learn what is acceptable and what is NOT acceptable to chew (your terms, not theirs). DO NOT GET UPSET WHEN YOUR PUP CHEWS ON SOMETHING YOU DIDN'T WANT THEM TO CHEW! Instead, realize that you should have kept a closer eye on your pup and removed all inviting and not acceptable chew items from their access.

A supply of Bitter Apple (spray and cream) can help. The spray can be used on most items without harming them. The cream and the spray can be used on furniture, cabinets, wood, metal items, and just about anything. Bitter Apple has to be reapplied regularly as it gradually loses its potency. Another item that is effective is Boundary spray. Both of these products are effective in the house and the yard.

Pups and older dogs (who have not previously been trained) can learn what is acceptable and what is not acceptable to chew. To correct the pup/dog for chewing, you have to catch them in the act. Punishing or scolding a pup/dog "after the fact" makes NO sense to them. If your pup/dog *appears* remorseful, it is because they sense and are reacting to your displeasure. The pup/dog is NOT reacting because they understand that they should not have used their mouth on something because doing so is part of being a dog!

When your pup/dog is chewing on something you consider unacceptable, you need to "startle/stop" the behavior and immediately DIVERT their attention to an appropriate/acceptable (by your terms) behavior. The SHAKE CAN chapter explains this in detail. Basically, you use some sound like the "shake can" or the sharp "EHHH" sound to startle/stop the behavior. Then, you have approximately 2-3 seconds to get their attention diverted to some other activity or behavior. If you do not divert their attention, the pup/dog will return to the previous activity or behavior. The "startle/stop" mechanism is not the solution to any behavior; rather it just momentarily stops the behavior which provides the opportunity to divert and pattern train your pup/dog to an acceptable and

equally rewarding behavior. (*NOTE: Please read the SHAKE CAN chapter for a full explanation of this process.*)

When using the shake can or the sharp “EHHH” sound, follow the described directions and say “NO CHEW, GOOD NO CHEW”. Immediately, divert their attention to an acceptable chew item or toy. Play with them for a couple of minutes to make the new item interesting and rewarding. If you merely give them something else to chew on, they may or may not be interested. You have to help your pup/dog get interested in the new item so it will be rewarding and self-reinforcing. When you are consistent with this routine, your pup/dog will quickly learn that “certain” items will cause that unpleasant noise to occur and this OTHER item is great fun and even gets them extra attention.

The first many times you use the “startle/stop” mechanism for chewing (or any other behavior), your pup/dog will NOT associate that sound with the behavior. It will take numerous repetitions and consistency and PATIENCE on your part. To truly understand your dog’s propensity for chewing means you must recognize that modifying this behavior (or other behaviors of this nature) constitutes changing/modifying an innate part of their existence. You cannot expect them to change an aspect this major in only a few exposures. To do this requires ultimate behavior modification. You must fully grasp the scope of what that means. Help your pup/dog to be successful, consistently and repetitively. Give them a chance to LEARN and become patterned to a behavior that is what you want. There is NO way your pup/dog can find their way to your desired behavior without you doing your part and doing it properly and effectively. This is true for ANY behavior, but is especially true when the behavior you seek to modify is innate and instinctual to being a dog.

KEY HELPFUL HINTS:

- 1) Bitter Apple and Boundary are excellent products to help your pup/dog not to use their mouths on certain items. These products have an unpleasant taste to them and when the pups/dogs put their mouths on something sprayed with these products, they will NOT like the taste and will not want to put their mouth on that item. (*NOTE: Both of these products have to be reapplied regularly because they gradually lose their potency and effect. This may mean reapplying several times a day.*) It will take numerous exposures to the unpleasant taste to convince your pup/dog that whatever item is not a good choice for chewing.
- 2) Chew-proof your house. Pick up all items that will be INVITING and ENTICING to a pup’s/dog’s mouth. This means viewing your home from the pup’s/dog’s perspective. Play devil’s advocate and KNOW that initially your pup WILL put their mouths on just about everything. Consequently, you need to reduce their chances of doing damage. You will have more than enough opportunities to work on modifying their “chewing” behavior.
- 3) Keep ALL sock and shoes out of harm’s way. If they chew your socks or shoes, it is YOUR fault for leaving them out...UNTIL your pup/dog has reliably learned what is acceptable for them to chew. DO NOT give your pup/dog their “own” shoe or sock. How can they tell the difference from “their” shoe or sock and “your” shoes and socks!!!!

- 4) Know that rug and carpet edges, couch skirts, and pillows are exceedingly enticing to pups and untrained dogs'. Block their access to these areas OR use the Bitter Apple or Boundary
- 5) NEVER, EVER let a pup or untrained dog out of your sight. Just like children, if they are somewhere else and quiet...they ARE into something...and probably chewing something!!!
- 6) For teething pups, keep several nylabones or gumabones in your freezer. Always have a frozen one available. These are very comforting during teething. You can even freeze a wet rag, if nothing else is available.
- 7) You need to make any "appropriate" chew or toy intriguing, enticing, and rewarding. Play with the item or hold it while the pup/dog chews on it initially. Once they learn an item is rewarding and/or offers teething relief, they will go back to it on their own. *(NOTE: Some people suggest applying a small amount of Vanilla Extract to an item to attract a pup/dog to become involved with that item. Others recommend spreading a thin layer of peanut butter or cheese on an item to attract the pup/dog to use their mouth on an item. CAUTION: Do not apply anything to a soft, rubber, latex, or cloth toy. Doing so may cause the pup/dog to try and "eat" said item which could lead to intestinal obstructions.)*
- 8) Above all, be patient...be consistent...be vigilant...be fair!!! Help your pup/dog to learn. Do not "set them up" to fail or displease you. Rather, HELP them to be successful! Your pup/dog really does want to please you; they want to learn their pack leader's rules. Your pup/dog will even modify their basic "innate tendencies" to please you...IF you will take the time to TEACH them, HELP them, and give them the chance to LEARN what you want and what pleases you!!

Always remember that your pup/dog is a DOG and they will only be capable of what their species dictates unless YOU help them to learn otherwise. If you want a perfect analogy, just think about a toddler and all efforts and precautions you take to help them learn, keep them SAFE, and keep items out of their reach. Consider that you would not allow a toddler to have access to anything that could harm them or that you would not want them to have contact with. It is no different for a pup/dog, except that you have to see their environment as a pup/dog does...not as you normally would.

Your pup/dog can only do what a pup/dog will do UNTIL you help them to learn otherwise. Be reasonable in your expectations. There will always be certain things you have to take note of even with the best trained dog. Think about someone who leaves something breakable on their coffee table when a toddler is visiting OR when they own a large dog with a swishing tail. IF you leave something breakable in the path of a "swishing/wagging" tail, this will end badly and it will not be the dog's fault! The same premise applies across the board to so many scenarios. If you are NOT prudent and vigilant and your designer shoes, purse, or other important possessions are chewed or destroyed, then the reality is that YOU failed somewhere. Do not make your pup/dog pay the price for your mistakes or errors in judgment.

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