

THE NEED TO GNAW

My office floor, ankle-deep in fluffy white stuff, looks like it's been struck by a blizzard. Our 9-month-old Cardigan Welsh Corgi, Lucy, lies contentedly on her rug under my desk, pulling more cotton batting out of the mutilated nose of her stuffed dog. As I sigh and kneel down to clean up the mess, I realize it's just one of the joys of owning a young dog.

Dogs chew. They *need* to chew. They chew for a variety of reasons. Certainly, puppies chew to explore their world as well as to relieve the pain and irritation of teething. Adult dogs also have a need to chew – to exercise their jaws, massage their gums, clean their teeth, and to relieve stress and boredom. It's as basic a behavior to them as a human baby sucking on a pacifier. Humans, as they grow, transition to sucking on 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.

Puppies, of course, are legendary for their chewing talents. I doubt there's a pet puppy in the universe who hasn't managed to destroy at least one of his owner's valuable possessions with those wickedly sharp baby teeth, despite scrupulous supervision and management. Just because they have a penchant for chewing anything they can find, however, doesn't mean we should let them.

Building Good Chew Habits

Puppies come to develop substrate preferences for elimination in the early months of their lives, and they similarly develop chew-object preferences. Hence the inadvisability of giving him old shoes or socks as chew toys! If you give your pup 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, or worse, exiling him to a life of loneliness in the back yard, where he can only chew on lawn furniture, loose fence boards, and the edges of your deck and hot tub.

If, instead, you focus Fido's fangs on approved chew toys at an early age and manage him well to prevent access to your stuff, 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, shopping – even while you're away at work. Since I allow and encourage Lucy to chew on stuffed toys, my own beloved stuffed animals must be kept safely out of her reach.

As long as Fido still snags the occasional shoe, knick-knack or other off-limits possession for a mid-day gnaw, it's too soon to give him unsupervised 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 can't wander into the parlor and 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™, Goodie Ships™, Buster Cubes™ and Roll-A-Treat Balls™ are just a few of the many interactive toys available that can keep Fido's teeth and mind acceptably busy. If you consistently supply him with desirable and acceptable objects upon which to chew, he'll eventually develop a strong preference for chewing on those objects. They will become the objects that he seeks

out when he feels the need to gnaw, and ultimately your personal possessions will be safe, even when your back is turned.

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 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 Fido'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™ or Roll-A-Treat Ball™ with his kibbles and make him work for his meal by pushing the ball or 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 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, 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 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 gnaw. 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 his game of "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 lowfat 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 eat them in one gulp! Protect the tidbits in your hand a little so he can only nibble 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 chew 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

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 seek the help of a qualified and positive training professional to help you resolve the resource guarding challenge. 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 Fido 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.

Fido is probably going to 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 Fido. *Be sure to wear durable shoes*

for this exercise. Sandals may leave you with bloody toes, and patent leather will be permanently scratched.

Fido 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, Click! your clicker (or say "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 Fido understands to look away from the object when he hears the "Leave it!" cue. Set some tempting items on the floor, put Fido 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 supervised 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 coveting 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 Fido 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.

I can testify that this works. Lucy has an intense interest in live cats as well as stuffed dogs. Our two cats, Viva and Barney, spent much of their time in alert mode when Lucy first joined the family – and Lucy spent a lot of time leashed or tethered, until she learned to "Leave it!" Not only can I turn her away from inappropriate chew objects with the cue, but a well-timed "Leave it!" can also forestall a dash across the floor after a frantic feline. Yes!

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 dog caretaking and allow you to experience the joys and rewards of sharing your life with a canine companion.

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