



▲ Do you think **FOR ONCE** you could chew with your mouth open?!

## THE BIG CHEW

**Chewing is a great thing—it's what all living creatures do to stay alive.** Beyond taking in nutrition it's something we do for the pure pleasure of tasting the wonderful array of flavors that are available to us. Even humans, harkening back to the past, can enjoy a good gnaw on a pork or beef rib bone. It certainly helps me to understand why it is so important for animals, including our canine companions to get a good chew on a regular basis.

For dogs, chewing is not only what they do to nourish themselves, it is also a way to instinctively keep their teeth clean, exercise their jaws and tire themselves and probably much more. It is one way they get to be a real dog. Let's face it—dogs love to chew. And, for most companion dogs, chewing on the right things can be a very happy and healthy way to pass time and channel pent up energy. It can, however, become problematic with some dogs when they decide to chew on inappropriate things that are not theirs—things we may value highly.

When the wonderful Oliver (subject of my last article for City Dog) was a puppy, he chewed a much-loved easy chair. Gratefully, it was the first and last thing of value Oliver ever chewed and destroyed. Once he was finished with the chair, he chewed on only dog toys and bones that were given to him. Many clients, especially those with new puppies, will contact me with stories of their puppy chewing on the wrong things like electronic devices and cords, valuable rugs and furniture, and, perhaps even their humans. They come to me looking for remedies for this behavior.

The bad news is that there is no quick or easy remedy for chewing. All dogs, especially puppies need to do it. And, it can be a healthy and natural outlet for domesticated dogs that are often bored, lying around and needing a way to fill their time. The best you can hope for is to give them plenty of exercise and something to do while you are away to minimize the damage they can do when left on their own. Chewing on something designated for them may be one way of attending to that need.

Let's step back for minute and talk first about puppies and chewing, and, how you might address a puppy that decides to mistakenly bite or chew on his or her humans. It's best to not allow a puppy or grown dog to "play bite" on us at all. If it does, you should yelp, scowl and put something in his or her mouth that belongs there like a toy or a "chewie" of some kind. Human skin is too tender and easy to bruise since we do not have the kind of furry covering to protect us from the those very sharp teeth. So, always have something handy like a bully stick, a rope, a toy, or a ball to "redirect" the unwanted biting or chewing behaviors.

Puppies are given those razor-like teeth for one specific reason—to develop a good or soft mouth, or what we often refer to as "acquired bite inhibition." By play biting with other puppies, the puppy learns that when he bites down too hard play will stop. This momentary cessation of play tells the puppy to bite less hard or to restrict the depth of his bite or his friends will not want to play. It's a vitally important piece of a puppy's early development, without which he may ultimately develop a hard mouth and fail to understand the harm he is able to inflict.

When a young puppy bites or chews on you, it is typically not an act of aggression. The puppy is doing what puppies do—teething or play biting—learning how to play safely with others of his own kind. To minimize the puppy biting on them, I often advise clients to look for others with young puppies and to let their puppy participate in supervised play with another pup. This way your puppy is getting the play biting he needs and craves and is developing social skills at the same time.

Short of going out and getting another puppy (two puppies may be twice the fun but also ten times the work), search for a reputable puppy kindergarten that allows supervised off-leash play or a day care that caters to puppies. Many dog day care facilities now dedicate a day or two per week for puppy play, where they get a good number of young puppies that come to get their fill of playing, biting and chewing with and on each other. The puppies return home having had their needs satisfied, and so they stop biting on their humans. They also return home tired and less apt to misbehave.

Once puppies age and grow their adult teeth, they will still need to chew to exercise their jaws, clean their teeth and pass time. For some dogs, the need to chew may dissipate, but for others it will continue well into middle age and

further. My cattle dog mix, Dolce, needs a good chew every day.

If deprived of this she becomes irritable and may behave badly. For her and others like her, a healthy chew on a raw frozen marrowbone or bully stick (stay away from rawhide, it's indigestible) is completely satisfying. Like all things given to dogs that are ingested on a regular basis, make sure the quality is good. Both of the items I mentioned are available as either organic or free-range varieties. As for bully sticks, untreated is best.

For dogs, chewing also seems to alleviate anxiety. While they are physically about as different as they can be from their wolf ancestors, somewhere in their sweet tiny brains is a desire to chew that came directly from the wolf ancestors.

The scene is easy to imagine: the pack has taken down some prey, and the majority of the meat is filling their bellies. Hunger satisfied, in a place that's safe and smells like family and home, the wolf is getting the last bits of nutrition from the carcass. Is it any wonder that our canine companions enjoy their re-creation of this wild moment?

It's hard for us to really know what goes on in the mind of our companion dog while they blissfully chew on something highly satisfying. It may be a way of satisfying a deeply wrought need rendered through purely instinctive urges. It may be a way of passing time when they are on their own.

What I do know is that dogs that get to be real dogs are ones that get to chew on a regular schedule. It helps them to be happy and stay healthy, and isn't that what we all really want for our best friends?

Of course it is! So, chew away! 🐾

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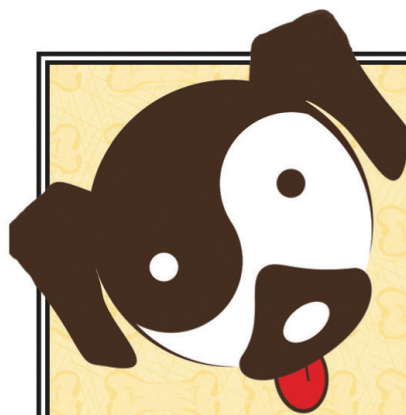
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