

Chewing

Puppies chew because they need to, especially whilst teething. Other reasons why dogs chew may include attention seeking, frustration, anxiety, boredom, or even loneliness. The question of loneliness will be tackled in a later section, so for the moment I will concentrate on teething and attention seeking.

Puppy Teething

As with human babies, teething can be a troublesome period for some puppies. You may well find a number of behavioural changes occurring during this period. For example, when my dog Nalle was a puppy, he went mad, leaping around, tearing up and down, grabbing at hands, arms, legs (and backsides), and chewing on ANYTHING which went anywhere near his mouth. In fact, his behaviour concerned me so much that I considered ringing colleagues in the behaviour profession to find out what could be going wrong.

At the time I had read a number of behaviour books and articles suggesting that Nalle may have been developing a dominance problem, and if not that, certainly a problem with attention seeking. This caused me a great deal of anxiety. However I was soon to discover where Nalle's problem stemmed from, particularly after one hellish evening when he became like a dog possessed. During those mad few hours, he began flicking his tongue at a loose tooth, just as children are known to do. Eventually, as he was pulling on his rope toy, the offending tooth popped out, and as it did, he flopped to the floor and went to sleep. Obviously Nalle had been distressed by the ordeal and I then began to notice that almost every time he went mad, he either had very sore gums or was just about to lose a tooth. I then started to wonder if any of these 'expert' writers on puppy training had ever lived with a puppy because not one of them mentioned the impact of teething upon behaviour.

Once I recognized Nalle's problem, I realized that he could not help the way he felt, so if I caught him chewing on something which was unacceptable, I made sure that I provided something which was acceptable, and as for his mad sessions, I allowed them to pass by without becoming too annoyed. Unfortunately at that time, I did not know that it was safe to use Bonjella on dogs, so Nalle missed out on the relief which many puppies attending my recent classes have benefited from.

Teething is not the only reason why dogs chew, another reason is that we inadvertently teach them to chew on things we'd rather they didn't. Teaching your dog to chew on the WRONG thing is so easy! How many times have you thought to yourself "the dog's really bored with that toy I bought last week, so I had better go out and buy her something new"? Or have you already reached the point where you don't bother buying toys at all because the dog refuses to play with them?

Most homes I visit have lots of dog toys that are either scattered around the house and Garden, or kept inside the dog's basket where it can help itself whenever it likes. To the dog these toys are often considered meaningless, or even boring, as they never appear to do anything interesting other than just sitting there decorating the floor. It is rather like the story of the child who lives in a sweet shop but who rarely eats sweets because it is fed up with the sight of them day in and day out.

However, look at what happens when the dog picks up something belonging to a human - all of a sudden people come rushing from all directions, barking and yipping "that's MY slipper", and now they even want to play chasing. So there you have it, when the dog picks up one of its own toys nothing happens - how boring. But when it picks up something of value to a human, just watch those two legged things fly - that's how you get a human to pay you some attention and perhaps play a game with you. Simple isn't it ... from the dog's point of view?

So how do you stop your dog from chewing things you rather it didn't? The answer is to teach it what is acceptable.

When Nalle was a puppy, I left ONE toy out for him to play with, usually something like a Nylabone or a Kong which I would stuff with bread and cheese, or bread and Marmite. All his other toys were kept in a box, or a cupboard well out of his reach. If Nalle showed even the slightest interest in the toy left on the floor, I cheered, praised and encouraged him to play with it, and even joined in the fun by taking it from his mouth and throwing it across the floor. When he started to chew quite merrily of his own accord, I left him to it, but went back every so often to engage him in another short playing session, this was to help him maintain his interest. When he had enough and potted off to do something else, or perhaps fell asleep, I picked the toy up, and replaced it with something else ready for the next occasion.

If Nalle decided to chew on the furniture, I would distract him with a toy, and then encourage him to play with that instead, once more going back every so often to maintain his interest - perhaps by either playing, tickling his tummy, or tossing the toy around in a bid to build up his excitement. From this, Nalle learnt that chewing the 'official' chew toy was far more rewarding than picking up tea towels or slippers, or even chewing the three-piece suite!

If either of my two dogs picked up something that could be sacrificed, I would leave them with it. For example, Nalle came running in on a number of occasions with a tea towel in his mouth. If I chased him, he would have trained me to play tea towels, so I ignored him. I eventually found a few old tea towels, which I didn't want anymore and left them lying around. Like the toys, which sit around doing nothing, they soon lost their value. So at the end of the day, items take on value to dogs, just as other items are valuable to humans. However, a dog's valuable item is the one which gives them the greatest pleasure, i.e. the one which moves and the one which plays!

In the past, some dogs have picked up objects which can be life threatening. For example, one Labrador who attended a previous puppy group picked up a carving knife and started running around with it hanging from his mouth. Fortunately, we had been discussing such eventualities that very week in puppy group, so his owners (although in a state of great panic) ran into their kitchen and opened the fridge door. With this the dog dropped the knife and came running in to see what they might have for him. Had they chased the dog in attempt to regain the knife it probably would have resulted in him running around in the opposite direction and chewing on the knife, the consequences of which could have been fatal! So please, be very careful how you handle such situations. If you think your dog is going to run around, for heavens sake head off in the opposite direction and try to find something that distracts from the situation. If all else fails try opening the front door and pretending someone is there.

If the dog has electric wires or cables in its jaws, then switch off the electricity supply before you try releasing your dogs grip. If the cables are damaged and the dog electrocutes itself, then you are in danger of electrocution too as the dog will be live. Hopefully you will never find yourselves in this situation.

Puppies Are Like Toddlers

During the early days I took great precautions. I moved any wires or cables into areas where I could block them off to puppy access. I also moved ornaments and precious items into areas where they could not be picked up. Shoes and slippers, which were not in use, were kept behind closed doors. However, I did leave a pair of old shoes and slippers lying around so that if they were chewed on or played with they would quickly lose their value. At the time of writing my dogs are now three years old, and I still have those old slippers and their value is totally meaningless to the dogs and have been for a long time.

It was only when the puppies had gone past their teething and silly stages that some of the hidden ornaments and items began to make their reappearance.