

Errorless Chewtoy-Training



The dog is a social and inquisitive animal. He needs to do something, especially if left at home alone. What would you like your dog to do? Crosswords? Needlepoint? Watch soaps on the telly? You must provide some form of occupational therapy for your puppy to pass the day. If your puppy learns to enjoy chewing chewtoys, he will look forward to settling down quietly for some quality chewing time. It is important to teach your puppy to enjoy chewing chewtoys more than chewing household items. An effective ploy is to stuff the puppy's chewtoys with kibble and treats. In fact, during your puppy's first few weeks at home, put away his food bowl and, apart from using kibble as lures and rewards for training, serve all your puppy's kibble stuffed in hollow chewtoys — Kongs, Biscuit Balls, Squirrel Dudes, Busy Buddy Footballs and sterilized bones.

For errorless chewtoy-training, adhere to the puppy confinement program. When you are away from home, leave the puppy in his puppy playroom with bed, water, toilet, and plenty of stuffed chewtoys. While you are at home, leave the puppy in his doggy den with plenty of stuffed chewtoys. Every hour after releasing the pup to relieve himself, play chewtoy games — chewtoy-search, chewtoy-fetch, and chewtoy-tug-o'-war. Your puppy will soon develop a very strong chewtoy habit because you have limited his chewing choices to a single acceptable toy, which you have made even more attractive with the addition of kibble and treats.

Once your dog has become a chewtoyaholic and has not had a chewing (or housesoiling) mishap for at least three months, you may increase your puppy's playroom to two rooms. For each subsequent month without a mistake your puppy may gain access to another room, until eventually he enjoys free run of the entire house and garden when left at home alone. If a chewing mistake should occur, go back to the original puppy confinement program for at least a month.

In addition to preventing household destruction, teaching your puppy to become a chewtoyaholic prevents him from becoming a recreational barker because chewing and barking are obviously mutually exclusive behaviors. Also, chewtoyaholism helps your puppy learn to settle down calmly because chewing and dashing about are mutually exclusive behaviors.

Chewtoyaholism is especially useful for dogs with Obsessive Compulsive Disorder since it provides them with an acceptable and convenient means to work out their obsessions and compulsions. Your dog may still have OCD, but a chewtoyaholic will happily spend his time obsessively and compulsively chewing his stuffed chewtoys.

Most important, chewtoy chewing keeps the puppy occupied and effectively helps prevent the development of separation anxiety.

What Is a Chewtoy?

A chewtoy is an object for the dog to chew that is neither destructible nor consumable. If your dog destroys an object, you will have to replace it, and that costs money. If your dog consumes the object, you may have to replace your dog. Eating non-food items is extremely hazardous to your dog's health. The type of chewtoy you choose will depend on your dog's penchant for chewing and his individual preferences. I have seen some dogs make a cow's hoof or a compressed rawhide chewy last forever, whereas other dogs consume them in a matter of minutes. For years, I considered Kong products to be the Cadillacs of chewtoys. Now, there are other equally good products, such as Premier Pet Product's Squirrel Dudes and Busy Buddy Footballs. Hollow sterilized long bones are a very close second choice. I like Kong and Premier products and sterilized bones because they are simple, natural, and organic, i.e., not plastic. Also, being hollow, they can be stuffed with food.

Dinner from Chewtoys, Not from Bowls

Customarily, puppies receive their entire daily allotment of kibble at dinner, which often becomes a jackpot reward for boisterously barking and expectantly bouncing around. Moreover, if you allow your puppy to wolf down dinner from a bowl, he will be at a loss for what to do for the rest of the day. In the wild, dogs spend a good 90 percent of their waking hours searching for something to eat, and so in a sense, regular bowl-feeding deprives a dog of his principal activity — searching for food. Instead, after eating, your inquisitive puppy will search for entertainment for the rest of the day. Most likely you will consider your puppy's choices of occupation to be mischievous misbehavior.

Without a doubt, regularly feeding a new puppy (or adult dog) from a bowl is the single most disastrous mistake in dog husbandry and training. Although unintentional, the effects of bowl-feeding are often severely detrimental for the puppy's household manners and sense of well-being. In a sense, each bowl-fed meal steals the puppy's *raison d'être* — its very reason for being. Within seconds of gulping his meal, the poor pup now faces a mental void for the rest of his day with nothing but long, lonely hours to worry and fret, or work himself into a frenzy.

As the puppy adapts to fill the void, normal behaviors such as chewing, barking, strolling, grooming, and playing become stereotypical, repetitive, and maladaptive. Specific behaviors increase in frequency until they no longer serve any useful function except to pass the time. Investigative chewing becomes destructive chewing. Alarm barking becomes incessant barking. Strolling from one place to another becomes repetitively pacing, or racing back and forth. Investigating a shadow or light becomes a neurotic fixation. Routine grooming becomes excessive licking, scratching, tail-chasing, head-pressing, or in extreme cases, self-mutilation.

Stereotyped behaviors cause the release of endorphins, perpetuating their repetition, and in a sense, the dog becomes drugged and hooked on mindless, repetitive activity. Stereotyped behaviors are like behavioral cancers; as they progressively increase in frequency and squeeze most useful and adaptive responses from the dog's behavior repertoire until eventually the "brain-dead" dog spends hours on end barking, pacing, chewing himself, or simply staring into space.

A vital facet of your puppy's early education is to teach him how to peacefully pass the time of day. Feeding your puppy's kibble only from hollow chewtoys keeps your puppy happily occupied and content for hours on end. It allows the puppy to focus on an enjoyable activity so that he doesn't dwell

on his loneliness. Each piece of extracted kibble also rewards your puppy for settling down calmly, for chewing an appropriate chewtoy, and for not barking.

Chewtoy Stuffing

An old chewtoy becomes immediately novel and exciting when stuffed with food. If you use kibble from your puppy's normal daily ration your puppy will not put on weight. To protect your puppy's waistline, heart, and liver, it is important to minimize the use of treats in training. Use kibble as lures and rewards for teaching basic manners and reserve freeze-dried liver treats for initial housetraining, for meeting children, men, and strangers, as a garnish for stuffing Kongs (see below), and as an occasional jackpot reward for especially good behavior.

Kong Stuffing 101

The basic principle of Kong stuffing ensures that some food comes out quickly and easily to instantly reward your puppy for initially contacting his chewtoy; bits of food come out over a long period of time to periodically reward your puppy for continuing to chew; and some of the best bits never come out, so your puppy never loses interest. Squish a small piece of freeze-dried liver in the small hole in the tip of the Kong so your puppy will never be able to get it out. Smear a little honey around the inside of the Kong, fill it up with kibble, and then block the big hole with crossed dog biscuits. There are numerous creative variations on basic Kong stuffing. One of my favorite recipes comprises moistening your puppy's kibble, spooning it into the Kong, and then putting it in the freezer overnight—a Kongsicle! Your dog will love it.

Kong Is King!

If from the outset you always confine your puppy with a selection of stuffed Kongs and Biscuit Balls, chewing these appropriate chewtoys will soon become an integral part of his day. Your puppy will quickly develop a socially acceptable Kong habit. And remember, good habits are just as hard to break as bad habits. Your puppy will now spend a large part of his day musing over his Kong products.

Let's pause for a moment to consider all the bad things your puppy will not be doing if he is quietly engaged with his chewtoys. He will not be chewing inappropriate household and garden items. He will not be a recreational barker. (He will still bark when strangers come to the house, but he will not spend all day barking for barking's sake.) And he will not be running around, fretting, and working himself up if left at home alone.

The wonderful thing about teaching a puppy to enjoy chewing chewtoys is that this activity excludes many alternative, extremely annoying puppy behaviors. A stuffed Kong is one of the best stress-relievers, especially for anxious, obsessive, and compulsive dogs.

A Kong for a dog is also one of the best stress-relievers for the owner. There is no single device that so easily and so simply prevents or resolves so many bad habits and behavior problems.

Settle Down and Shush

High on the educational agenda is to teach your pup that there are times for play and times for quiet. Specifically, you want to teach the youngster to settle down and shush for short periods. Your life will be more peaceful, and your pup's life will be less stressful once he learns that frequent little quiet moments are the name of the game in his new home.

Beware the trap of smothering your new puppy with non-stop attention and affection during his first days at home, for then he will whine, bark, and fret when left alone at night, or during the daytime when you are at work and the children are at school. Of course the pup is lonely! This is his first time alone without his mother, littermates, or human companionship.

You can really help to ease your pup's anxiety by getting him used to settling down alone during his first few days at home. Remember, first impressions are very important and long lasting. Also keep in mind that the average suburban puppy will likely spend many hours and days left to his own devices. So it is well worthwhile to teach the pup how to spend time by himself. Otherwise, the puppy may become anxious when left alone and develop hard-to-break chewing, barking, digging, and escaping habits.

When you are at home, confine your puppy to his doggy den with lots of chewtoys for housetraining, chewtoy-training, and teaching the pup to settle down peacefully and happily. It is important to confine your puppy for short periods when you are home in order to teach him how to enjoy his own company when left at home alone.

I am certainly not advocating leaving puppies alone for long periods of time. But it is a fact of modern day life that many puppy owners leave home each day to work for a living, so it is only fair to prepare the pup for this.

When you are at home, the key is short-term confinement. The idea is not to lock up the puppy for hours on end, but rather to teach him to settle down quickly in a variety of settings and be confined for variable but mostly fairly short, periods. Make sure the only objects within reach are stuffed chewtoys. Thus the dog develops a strong chewtoy habit right from the outset, if only because there is precious little else at hand to chew. And let me repeat: A puppy happily preoccupied with a stuffed chewtoy is not destroying household articles and furniture, and is not barking. When you are at home, it is also a good idea to occasionally confine your puppy to his puppy playroom (long-term confinement area) as a practice run for your absence. Occasional long-term confinement when you are at home allows you to monitor your pup's behavior so you have some idea how he will act when you are gone.

If your puppy barks or whines when confined to his short- or long-term confinement area, reward-train him to rest quietly. Sit next to your puppy's crate or just outside his puppy playroom and busy yourself by reading a book, working on the computer, or watching television. Completely ignore your puppy while he vocalizes, but each time he stops barking, immediately praise him calmly and offer a piece of kibble.

Adapted from *BEFORE You Get Your Puppy* by Dr. Ian Dunbar.