

# The truth about chewing

**Sarah Whitehead**

To us, chewing often seems like some kind of optional extra in a dog's day. Yes, dogs like to chew things, but as long as it's directed at their own toys and 'bones', then it's a rather insignificant recreational behaviour. Of course, all this changes if you own a puppy, an adolescent, or a dog that is insecure in some way – then, chewing can become an all-important part of your world as you strive to keep your precious things out of your dog's chomping range!

In the last few months, I have been thinking a lot about this subject – partly out of need (yes, I am the proud owner of a newly rehomed adolescent!) and partly out of interest – because the behaviour seems to link with so many other behaviour patterns that I notice in my dogs and in others too.

So, if you think that chewing is just about the dog exercising its jaws, then think again.

## **Rover's Wrigley's**

In the first three–four weeks after bringing my rescue Collie-cross home, the house rung out with the sounds of chewing! Pretty much anytime the new girl wasn't asleep or on the move, she chewed. At first, we put this down to adolescent enthusiasm. However, as time went on, we began to realise that while Skye was settling in well, all the novelty of living in a domestic environment required a stress outlet - a coping strategy – and for her, chewing provided it. Thankfully, our house is generally strewn with dog toys and items for canine teeth to enjoy as recreation, so she didn't have to wander far before tripping over something that looked worthwhile to gnaw on, but her need to chew a lot was also matched by a particular voraciousness that seemed to characterise her state. Interestingly, this has now calmed down, and although she still likes to chew, her overall motivation seems to have changed.

It is generally thought that the action of chewing in many species releases endorphins – nature's feel-good hormones. This may partially explain why dogs that are stressed may find relief through chewing. It's also likely that dogs can use up energy this way, and redirect feelings of frustration via the teeth and mouth – after all, they can't ask for a counselling session, or vent their feelings in an e-mail.

Of course, in puppies, chewing must help to ease the transition from deciduous teeth to permanent ones. Losing teeth at this stage makes the gums itchy and irritable, and chewing can definitely help to ease these symptoms. Adolescents too seem to need to chew to get them through a second 'teething' stage if they are not to use your shoes and skirting boards as dental floss. Some theories suggest that in adolescence the adult teeth settle into the bone of the jaw, once again setting up some irritation that can be reduced by chewing. I've always wondered if humans experience the same thing. As a species it is estimated that we chew our way through an average of 130 sticks of chewing gum per person every year – and I wonder what percentage of this is consumed by teenagers? Answers on the back of a Wrigley's wrapper please!

## **Good vibrations**

Ever wondered why your dog goes and gets a chew toy, brings it back to your chair, lies down and

proceeds to gnaw at it directly on top of your shoe? It really takes something to ignore those interesting vibrations as they travel down through the bones in your foot! And that, of course, is the point. On days when dogs just fancy a bit of company whilst chewing, they will put the chew on the floor next to you. On other days, perhaps when you have been sitting at the computer a bit too long, or have been watching TV with avid interest, your dog may just have worked out that this is a polite but effective way to get your attention.

### **Chewing Olympics**

Ever had a doggie friend come to stay? Noticed that all those dog chew items that normally get ignored at the bottom of the toy box are suddenly flavour of the month? It often only takes one dog to show an interest in a particular chew item for other dogs in the home to suddenly take up chewing again as a sport. This can either be competitive – with both dogs chewing frantically and keeping a careful eye on each other, or it can be a team game – with chewing in synchrony and item swapping as a part of the integral relay.

With dogs that are well known to each other, this type of chewing may be a social event too – it's a bit like humans having a cup of tea together – while for dogs that are getting to know each other better it probably gives information about strength, determination, and safety – both through visual means, and scent. It's likely that chewing together is a rather bonding experience. After all, being able to chew a valued item right next to another dog takes trust – and where there's trust, there's bonding.

Chewing between dogs is certainly contagious too. We gave up putting callers on speaker-phone in the office a long time ago, as any convenience is all too easily over-shadowed by the cacophony of simultaneous chewing from the office dog shelf – once one dog gets going, they all want to join in – usually as noisily as possible.

### **So what's best to give your dog to chew?**

As part of my research for this article, I contacted four different vet practices and asked them what they think is the best and safest chew-item for dogs. I have to say I was quite surprised, with most keen to tell me horror stories of dogs injured or made ill by chewing almost any of the items on my query list.

Two practices said that they thought nylon chews were safe for most dogs, while the other two reported seeing horrible problems with them and said they would never recommend them. One practice said they thought sterilised or roast bones were OK, while all the others said they present too much risk of splintering or causing tooth damage. One practice liked raw hide chews, the others didn't.

None of the practices knew about Stagbars (pieces of antler to which my dogs are currently addicted) and so couldn't comment on safety. Kongs (stuffed with tasty food of course) were thought by all to be pretty safe provided that the Kong was large enough for the dog not to swallow, (even once the dog is fully grown) and that it was given 'under supervision'.

And there lies the rub! It's all very well saying that chew items should only be given under supervision, but surely the point of getting dogs to chew is that they will then be able to do it in your absence – after all, that's the thing that's going to save your furniture, shoes and potentially your relationship with your dog. Perhaps the message here is that all dogs chew differently. Indeed, a quick Facebook poll revealed that this is a question which is very much 'dog dependant' –

proving the theory that there's definitely more than one chewing style and motivation amongst dogs, as some seem able to enjoy some chews safely – such as raw bones or tripe sticks - while others have had bad experiences with them. Always check to see how your dog is with a certain type of chew item – and don't assume that what's safe for one is safe for all.