

PUPPY MOUTHING

Aside from housetraining, puppy mouthing (including biting and grabbing) is probably the single most common behaviour issue that prompts new puppy owners to ask for help.

Why do puppies mouth?

The most important thing to understand about puppy mouthing is that it is a completely, one-hundred-percent normal behaviour. Puppy mouthing is *not* a "behaviour problem" that needs to be trained away as quickly as possible. The fact is, it's not a behaviour problem at all. All puppies do this. They're *supposed* to do this. It may be annoying for us, but it's a normal part of their development. And it will end. Most puppies are biting and mouthing much less by the time they are 8-10 months old, and fully grown adult dogs (older than 2-3 years) virtually never use their mouths the way that puppies do.

Think of your puppy's mouth as a multi-function tool used not only to eat meals but to investigate the world around her, during social play and greetings, and to get your attention. If your puppy had hands, she would use them. But because she has no hands, she uses her mouth – she picks up objects to see what they feel like and if they are good for chewing; she grabs your hands, your sleeves, and your pant legs to get your attention and to instigate play. So when you play with your puppy using your hands, or when you let your puppy mouth your hands, skin, hair or clothing, you are teaching her it's OK to use her mouth.

Mouthing, biting and grabbing are self-rewarding behaviours and they can also be rewarded by your attention and interaction. They can easily intensify if allowed to continue, and what may have seemed like cute behaviour in a puppy isn't so amusing when she becomes an adult.

Puppies may also mouth or bite to get you to stop using your hands or to move away. This may happen if you have inadvertently scared or frightened your puppy, if you are petting too hard or too much, or if you pick your puppy up too much, too roughly, or too frequently. Puppies may mouth or bite if they want you to move away and leave them alone, such as when they want to sleep or eat. These are also perfectly normal canine behaviours. If your puppy had a voice, she would use it. But because she has no voice, she uses her mouth.

Mouthing (including biting and grabbing) is a normal species-specific behaviour for a young dog, and therefore the burden is squarely on you to manage your interactions with your puppy to help avoid problems, and to have patience and empathy while she learns.

What can I do to stop my puppy from mouthing?

Fortunately, the answer is: plenty! Keep in mind that your goal is not to “stop” this behaviour or train it away – it will resolve on its own with age. Instead, we want to make this normal developmental period as painless and stress-free as possible.

1. Provide self-entertaining alternatives

You must provide an appropriate outlet for normal mouthing behaviour such as a variety of age-appropriate toys and treats. However, even dedicated puppy owners who are trying to do everything right may not be providing enough variety to keep their puppies busy. Or, they may have a pile of what they think are great chew toys at home... but their puppy doesn't like them. Puppies have their own preferences about what they enjoy, just like people – so it may take some trial and error to find what works for your puppy.

2. Plan for and manage the active times

While puppies are generally very active and exploratory when they are not sleeping (and they will sleep a lot!), there are two periods during the day when they can be particularly active: sometime in the early morning and sometime in the early evening. The more active they are, the more active their mouths will be! If you can predict these highly active times, you can plan for them. Use baby gates or a dog pen to set up a safe puppy area in a social part of the house. Furnish this area with age-appropriate toys and treats, a bowl of water, and a soft bed. Use this area to safely manage your puppy's activities for short periods of time.

3. Teach your puppy a more appropriate way to interact with you

Since attention and interaction are usually what the puppy wants, appropriate play with a toy is an essential step for discouraging inappropriate and potentially harmful mouthing. However, interactive play with your puppy has the potential to cause her to become overenthusiastic or frustrated, and this can lead to an increase in mouthing. Play increases a puppy's arousal and the puppy may then find it hard to control herself and stop play and may become excessively physical during play. This happens when people play too infrequently, too intensely and for too long. Therefore, keep your toy play sessions short and frequent, and intersperse short bouts of play with short bouts of training (e.g. a sit or a drop): this will help to calm the puppy down before she gets overexcited.

4. Teach your puppy that human hands are safe and relaxing

Practice handling exercises with your puppy. Set aside a few times a day when your puppy is relatively calm. Slowly stroke the puppy from head to toe. Pair this with some of your puppy's biscuits to help your puppy learn to associate hands/handling with something she enjoys and with relaxation.

What should I do when my puppy mouths me?

Redirect, redirect, redirect.

You need to have a variety of different toys available anytime you're interacting with your puppy. Remember, no teasing her with your hands or fingers, or using your shirt sleeve for a game of tug, no rough and tumble games, no pushing or pulling or shoving or wrestling with the hands. While this might seem cute for a moment or two, it is not a habit we want to teach! In fact, mouthing, grabbing and biting are common complaints of people who have played too roughly with their dog.

If you're playing with your puppy and she bites your hands, become very still. The instant puppy disengages, quickly grab one of her toys and use that to play with her instead. Be sure to have different types on hand – long floppy toys for tugging, plush squeaky toys for biting and carrying, and smaller toys or balls for chasing or fetching.

What about petting? If you're trying to pet or snuggle with your puppy and she bites you, calmly stop petting and ignore her until she calms down. If your puppy is particularly excitable and mouthy, you may find that you can only pet her when she's relaxed and in the mood for cuddles – this is perfectly okay! Just respect the fact that petting is too over-stimulating for her sometimes and wait until she's ready.

What should I NOT do when my puppy mouths me?

NEVER PUNISH!

This may be difficult to accept, especially when your neighbours, co-workers, distant relatives, and the guy you saw at the pet store are constantly giving you "helpful tips" on how to stop your puppy from biting. These suggestions may be well-intentioned, but if they include punishment or discipline of any kind, they are unnecessary and have the potential to do lasting harm.

The problem with punishment in this situation is twofold. First, it does nothing to help your puppy understand what she should do with her mouth instead. Remember that she was born with an instinctive need to put her mouth on something, all the time. She cannot just "stop it", any more than she could stop eating, or breathing, or going to the bathroom. So instead of correcting her for this perfectly normal impulse, just redirect her to something more appropriate.

Secondly, punishing your puppy in this way can have far-reaching behavioural consequences once she's grown. There will be many times in your dog's life when you will need to put your hands near her face, or your fingers in her mouth. If your puppy learns that hands around her mouth are painful or scary, these things will be exponentially more difficult when she's older. She needs to feel safe when you touch her or reach for her, so don't do anything to poison this trust.