

# **Mouthing**

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One of the most common issues raised in my puppy classes is “mouthing.” Like many puppy behaviors, mouthing is rooted in canine instinct. It is not inherently “bad” but like many instinctive behaviors it can become problematic in a dog sharing its life with humans. In the wild, the other members of the pack would teach a pup if and when the behavior is useful or appropriate. In the home, it is up to us to teach our pups how to channel and control their behaviors in acceptable ways. You cannot allow your pup to mouth just because it is “natural.” Humans and dogs made that trade-off generations ago when dogs domesticated. Some natural and instinctive behaviors had to change in order for dogs to live safely in a human world.

You cannot allow your pup to mouth you or use his teeth indiscriminately. You can—and must—address the need that underlies the mouthing. If you provide your dog with enough exercise, structure and supervision, appropriate play and attention, and safe and satisfying chew toys, then problems with mouthing should be rare occurrences.

## **Teething vs. Mouthing**

The teething stage begins at about 3 weeks of age and continues until approximately 6 months. I sometimes hear a client excuse a pup’s mouthing because “he’s teething.” In fact, teething and mouthing have different motivations. Teething pups chew to alleviate discomfort. They usually chew on things, but they’ll chew on whatever is available—including your hand. Mouthing pups are nipping and grabbing your hands and clothes because they are trying to engage you in social play. When those razor sharp puppy teeth are bearing down on your skin you may feel that this distinction is irrelevant—but in fact teething and mouthing are separate issues. Although your pup may experience both issues at the same time, they have different solutions.

During the teething phase, provide safe acceptable chew items such as bully sticks. Buy a couple of chew toys that can be put in the freezer so that the cold can provide even more soothing relief for the discomfort in his gums. When you cannot supervise your pup, keep him safely contained so that he does not seek (and find) household items to chew.

## **It’s All Fun and Games Until . . .**

Puppies usually start to play with each other at about 2 ½ weeks old. Initially they crawl on each other and mouth each other; as their mobility increases the crawling becomes wrestling and the mouthing becomes biting. As they get older they will begin barking at each other to initiate play, sometimes even baring their teeth. Once toys are introduced, stealing or grabbing of toys and getting everyone to chase you

is the new game. But even that game usually ends in a tackle with biting and fighting over toys. This is how dogs play! And pups definitely need to play.

In your home, it is unlikely your pup has a litterful of “peers” with whom he can tussle and tug. However, if you allow him to bite you—even in play—you are telling him that you are like another pup, when in fact you need to be his leader. So, you must teach your pup appropriate ways to play with you and your family members that are respectful of your leadership role, but still give him an outlet for the need to pull, tug, and hold.

### **Teaching Play**

I am a strong believer that puppies need to play “tug of war.” Playing tug games does not, as some believe, make dogs aggressive. In fact, tug games release energy and stress. Just as teething pups need to chew, developing pups need to pull and tug. If you don’t give them something acceptable to latch onto, they will use those razor sharp puppy teeth to latch onto you. When played properly, tug games improve your pup’s behavior and attitude by teaching him that even in play, there are boundaries and limits.

Purchase rope toys or use an old beach towel with knots in it for the puppy to tug on. When your pup latches on to the towel allow him to pull and tug. If he grabs your hand or clothing, correct him and stop the game. Your pup will soon catch on that the towel or rope is an acceptable “target” and that hands and clothing are not. Once your pup understands this rule, you can have children play a variation of a tug game—with the bonus that both the pup and the children are burning energy! A child can run with the long, knotted beach towel dragging behind. The puppy can chase and grab the towel, leaving your child’s clothing and feet alone. If he tries to grab anything but the towel, the child should stop running and you should intervene to correct and stop the game.

### **Correcting Mouthing**

As you teach your pup to play appropriately, he will occasionally need a correction. In nature, the senior members of the pack teach the pups boundaries by correcting them for overstepping. It doesn’t make the pups fearful or sad. It simply teaches them how to behave in the group. In your home, it is your job to ensure your pup knows where the boundaries are. He looks to you to teach him how to behave in your family group.

There are no shortcuts to teaching your puppy not to mouth or bite. While you may see suggestions such as holding the mouth closed, putting pressure on the tongue, or other “tricks” for stopping mouthing, these actions can cause pain or injury. At the very least, they will cause the puppy to become more excited or anxious, which will only increase his mouthing.

You will correct your pup for inappropriate mouthing just as you do for other unacceptable behaviors. Your pup should wear a training collar and leash anytime

he is out and about under your supervision—even in your home. If he grabs your hand or clothing, do not jerk away. Instead, give him a firm leash correction and a verbal reprimand. After the correction, do not return to play until he calms.

Sometimes, it may seem as if your pup just can't control himself. In that case he is either over stimulated or overtired. If he is overtired, crate him and leave the room. After initial protests, he will rest. If you suspect he is over stimulated or has too much energy to play appropriately, take him for a long walk to expend his energy before trying to teach him to play without mouthing.

### **But he looks so cute. . .**

Yes, your pup is adorable. He is the most adorable pup that ever walked on earth. But you are trying to teach your adorable pup to stop mouthing. So don't get down on the floor with him to cuddle. When you are on the floor, you are "dog." And if you want your pup to stop mouthing and biting you need to keep the distinction between "person" and "dog" crystal clear. You are his leader. There are plenty of ways to show your affection without getting on the floor.

Nobody in the house should be wrestling on the floor with the pup. Don't encourage your pup to "attack" you because it's so cute that he's so little and thinks he's so tough. All of these things may amuse you in the moment when your pup is little and cute, but they teach him that jumping on and biting humans is acceptable behavior. And it isn't. Ever.

### **Stay one step ahead.**

One of the most effective ways to avoid bad behavior is to anticipate it. All puppies have a "witching hour." For your pup it may be after waking up, or just after mealtime, or when he is over tired. I recommend that all pups have good structure to their days. Take a look at the structure of your pup's day and if necessary, make adjustments to his schedule and activities to address his particular needs.

If you know he gets mouthy right after he wakes up and is full of energy, schedule your longest walks around that time. Move at a constant pace that keeps his little legs moving. Your goal is to burn off his excess energy and that won't happen on a leisurely stroll with lots of stopping and sniffing. Keep him moving! Even a young pup that hasn't had all of his shots can take an energy-burning walk. As long as you keep him on the sidewalk or road and away from other dog's feces, he has enough immunity from his mother's milk to be safe.

When you play fetch and tug of war, keep the puppy on his leash so he can't run from you or redirect to your pants or body parts.

Some puppies bite more when they are overtired. That is a perfect time for a nap! Place your puppy in his crate and let him sleep it off. Yes, he may bark and cry initially, but he will eventually fall asleep.

Make a point of observing your pup to find these and other triggers related to mouthing (or any other undesirable behavior.) If you avoid his triggers and reduce the instances of mouthing, he will more quickly learn that he can play and interact without mouthing.

### **Conclusion**

Unfortunately, pups do not just automatically outgrow the tendency to mouth. Left unaddressed, mouthing often becomes nipping and nipping can become biting. Even if there is no malice behind the nip or the bite, it is unsafe to allow your pup to think he can choose to use his mouth and teeth on you or others.

The good news is that your pup learns about the world from you! So establish your leadership role, maintain clear boundaries, and meet your pup's needs for exercise, attention, structure, and play. Stay a step ahead of him so he has fewer opportunities to mouth. Just remember, he can only learn that pups don't mouth people if he knows that he's a pup and you're a people!