

Chewing and mouthing

Puppies use their mouths to explore the world around them, and to play. They might especially chew or mouth when they're teething, as they lose their baby teeth and gain their adult teeth by around 7 months of age. It's all perfectly normal behaviour for dogs, but they run into problems if they start chewing or mouthing us or our belongings. This is behaviour we humans find unacceptable – as it hurts and is dangerous - but of course they don't understand that! They just know that to them, it feels natural and good!

Because chewing and mouthing are normal dog behaviours, we need to give our dogs plenty of opportunities to do these in a safe and acceptable way. If we are clear and consistent about what things our puppies are allowed to chew and mouth, then they will learn that they can enjoy these behaviours without creating any problems.

Calmness and consistency give your puppy a clear message!

It can be incredibly frustrating for owners while puppies are learning which things we are happy for them to chew and those which we are not, because they simply do not understand the difference so might chew absolutely anything!

With any aspect of puppy training it is important to remain calm, be consistent, and always reward good behaviour. If your puppy chews appropriate objects, reward them by giving them treats and your attention, or having a game with them - but withdraw your attention if they chew the wrong things.

- ✿ Puppy-proof your environment. Make sure you remove prized possessions or put them out of reach. Using a playpen or child-gates is a great way to restrict your puppy's access around the house – but always make sure they always have fun and safe things to chew in their zone!
- ✿ Provide a range of suitable toys and chews for your puppy to play with. Try soaking these in water and freezing them to help soothe sore teeth and gums. Keep a selection of toys aside so that you can swap them daily to keep your puppy interested! Remember to **praise** them when they chew on the right thing – joining in and having a game is a great way to reward them!
- ✿ Try to keep a toy handy for when your puppy is feeling playful, so you always have something appropriate to let them have in their mouth. Recognising signs that your puppy is getting ready to play – an increase in energy, bouncing, pouncing and batting things with their paws for example - means you can **give him the**



toy before he starts chewing or mouthing at you. This way you're showing him how to get it right from the start.

- ✿ Avoid rough and tumble wrestling games in which your puppy might learn to enjoy biting you as part of the game or you'll risk him expecting to be able to play like this whenever he wants and with whoever he wants. Dogs find it very hard to understand that mouthing you is sometimes okay but sometimes not, as that's really confusing! Puppies really need a consistent message – **mouthing us is never okay** - otherwise they'll become confused and could become worried or frustrated.
- ✿ Provide appropriate exercise for both body and mind using different ways to provide a variety of positive and fun experiences such as food puzzles, training with rewards, and play. Rest and relaxation is also important, as puppies are more likely to mouth when over-tired.

What to do if your puppy does mouth you...

- ✿ Any time your puppy's teeth touch you STOP whatever it is you are doing immediately and stay still. If they continue, turn away and cross your arms. Withdrawing your attention by staying calm, quiet and no longer joining in with them, demonstrates to them it's not acceptable. If this doesn't work move away, leave them to calm down and return once they're calm and passive, then **praise** them and re-engage with them.
- ✿ By stopping interacting with them whenever they start mouthing, your puppy will quickly learn this behaviour is not okay, because it never works out well for them when they do it! Through consistent repetition of this, over time, they'll gradually stop mouthing you altogether because it just doesn't get them what they want – which is your attention and fun!
- ✿ At the same time, should they place their teeth on appropriate items such as chews and toys and this is highly rewarding and works out well for them, they'll be much more likely to do that again!
- ✿ There's no denying that puppy teeth hurt! Help yourself out by wearing thick, long-sleeved tops when teaching your puppy not to mouth, or getting your wellies out if your puppy mouths at your ankles, because this will protect you while meaning you can ignore any attempt to get your attention through mouthing your ankles. Simply stand still – because moving might be enticing – and your puppy should soon realise this is no fun because nothing happens, no movement, no response, nothing! They might become frustrated and try harder to get a response, but thanks to your trusty rubber wellies you can calmly wait for the moment at which they stop altogether and then make sure you reward them for stopping by offering them the chance to enjoy an appropriate toy or chew instead. If you feel your puppy isn't acknowledging this, and their mouthing behaviour continues for a good while even though you're wearing wellies, then you should be able to get to safety without your legs being nipped and use



something alternative – like a toy - to interrupt this behaviour and for your puppy to have in their mouth while you move away to supervise from a distance, and just allow them to calm down without any of your direct attention or interaction. Seek professional help if your dog is really struggling to control their mouthing behaviour.

- ✿ Don't punish your puppy for mouthing or chewing, this will just make them worried and confused about you which could make their behaviour worse. It's okay to take a break from your puppy if things are getting difficult, they might simply need to sleep so leaving them to it might just give them the space they need to crash out!

If your puppy continues to bite with intensity and it doesn't appear to be getting any better, please seek professional support.

These resources have been created by Dogs Trust using the most up-to-date scientific-based understanding of dog behaviour and welfare needs and can be freely downloaded by anyone interested in learning more about understanding dog behaviour and training dogs.



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