



Wausau Animal Hospital

Puppy Mouthing

Puppies spend a great deal of time playing, chewing, and investigating objects. All of these normal activities involve puppies using their mouths and their needle-sharp teeth. When puppies play with people, they often bite, chew and mouth on people's hands, limbs and clothing. This kind of behavior may seem cute when your puppy is seven weeks old, but it's not so endearing when he's three or four months old—and getting bigger by the day.

What to do next: Teach Your Puppy That Teeth Don't Belong on Human Skin

- Substitute a toy or bone when your puppy tries to gnaw on fingers or toes.
- Puppies often mouth on people's hands when stroked, patted and scratched (unless they are sleepy or distracted). If your puppy gets all riled up when you pet him, distract him by feeding him small treats from your other hand. This will help your puppy get used to being touched without mouthing.
- Encourage noncontact forms of play, such as fetch and tug-of-war, rather than wrestling and rough play with your hands. To keep tug-of-war safe and fun for you and your puppy, you'll need to follow strict rules. Once your puppy can play tug safely, keep tug toys in your pocket or have them easily accessible. If he starts to mouth you, you can immediately redirect him to the tug toy. Ideally, he'll start to anticipate and look for a toy when he feels like mouthing.
- If your puppy bites at your feet or ankles, carry his favorite tug toy in your pocket. Whenever he ambushes, instantly stop moving your feet. Take out the tug toy and wave it enticingly. When your puppy grabs the toy, start moving again. If you don't happen to have the toy available, just freeze and wait for your puppy to stop mouthing you. The second he stops, praise and get a toy to reward him. Repeat these steps until your puppy gets used to watching you move around without going after your feet or ankles.
- Provide plenty of interesting and new toys so that your puppy will play with them instead of gnawing on you or your clothing.
- Provide plenty of opportunities for your puppy to play with other puppies and with friendly vaccinated adult dogs. Playing and socializing with your dog's buddies is important for your puppy's development—and if he expends a lot of his energy playing with other puppies, he'll feel less motivated to play roughly with you. Consider enrolling your puppy in a good puppy class, where he can have a supervised playtime with other puppies and learn some important new skills.
- Use a time-out procedure. Instead of giving your puppy time-outs for hard biting start to give him very brief time-outs (about 20-30 seconds) every time you feel his teeth touch your skin.

- The instant you feel your puppy's teeth touch you, give a high pitch yelp. Then immediately walk away from him. Ignore him for 30 to 60 seconds. If your puppy follows you or continues to bite and nip at you, leave the room for 30 to 60 seconds. (Be sure that the room is 'puppy-proofed' before you leave your puppy alone in it. Don't leave him in an area with things he might destroy or things that might hurt him.) After the brief time-out, return to the room and calmly resume whatever you were doing with your puppy.
- Alternatively, you can keep a leash attached to your puppy during time-out training and let it drag on the floor when you're there to supervise him. Then, instead of leaving the room when your puppy mouths you, you can take hold of his leash and lead him to a quiet area, tether him, and turn your back to him for the brief time-out. Then untie him and resume whatever you were doing.
- If a time-out isn't viable or effective, consider using a taste deterrent, such as grannick's bitter apple. Spray areas of your body and clothing that your puppy likes to mouth before you start interacting with him. If he mouths you or your clothing, stop moving and wait for him to react to the bad taste of the deterrent. Praise him lavishly when he lets go of you.
- Apply the bad taste to your body and clothes for at least two weeks. After two weeks of being punished by the bitter taste every time he mouths you, your puppy will likely learn to inhibit his mouthy behavior.
- Be patient and understanding. Playful mouthing is normal behavior for a puppy or young dog.

Because mouthing issues can be challenging to work with, don't hesitate to enlist the help of a Certified Professional Dog Trainer (CPDT). A CPDT will offer group or private classes that can give you and your dog lots of assistance with mouthing.

General Precautions

- Avoid waving your fingers and toes in your puppy's face or slapping the side of his face to entice him to play. Doing these things can actually encourage your puppy to bite your hands and feet.
- Do not discourage your puppy from playing with you in general. Play builds a strong bond between a dog and his human family. You want to teach your puppy to play gently, rather than not at all.
- Avoid jerking your hands or feet away from your puppy when he mouths. This will encourage him to jump forward and grab at you. It's much more effective to let your hands or feet go limp so that they aren't much fun to play with.
- Slapping or hitting puppies for playful mouthing can cause them to bite harder. They usually react by playing more aggressively. Physical punishment can also make your puppy afraid of you—and it can even cause real aggression. Avoid scruff shaking, whacking your puppy on the nose, sticking your fingers down his throat and all other punishments that might hurt or scare him.

When Does Mouthing Become Aggression?

Most puppy mouthing is normal behavior. However, some puppies bite out of fear or frustration, and this type of biting can signal problems with future aggression.

Puppy “Temper Tantrums”

Puppies sometimes have temper tantrums. Usually, tantrums happen when you’re still making a puppy do something he doesn’t like. Something as benign as simply holding your puppy still or handling his body might upset him. Tantrums can also happen when play escalates. (Even human “puppies” can have tantrums during play when they get overexcited or upset!) A puppy temper tantrum is more serious than playful mouthing, but it isn’t always easy to tell the difference between the two. In most cases, a playful puppy will have a relaxed body and face. His muzzle might look wrinkled, but you won’t see a lot of tension in his facial muscles. If your puppy has a temper tantrum, his body might look very stiff or frozen. He might pull his lip back to expose teeth or growl. Almost always, his bites will be much more painful than normal mouthing during play.

If you’re holding or handling your puppy and he starts to throw a temper tantrum, avoid yelping like you’re hurt. Doing that might actually cause your puppy to continue or intensify his aggressive behavior. Instead, be very calm and unemotional. Don’t hurt your puppy, but continue to hold him firmly without constriction, if possible, until he stops struggling. After he’s quieted down for just a second or two, let him go. Then make plans to contact a qualified professional for help. Repeat bouts of biting in frustration are not something that the puppy will simply grow out of, so your puppy’s behavior should be assessed and resolved as soon as possible.

Article courtesy of the ASPCA