



OUCH! How to Stop a Puppy from Biting and/or Mouthing.

All dogs have the potential to bite! There are NO EXCEPTIONS! Small children should NEVER be left unattended with a dog, even the family dog, as any dog may bite under a number of usually unpredictable circumstances.

Most puppies go through stages of biting or mouthing. This is normal behavior for a growing puppy. Babies put everything in their mouths for what doctors call "oral gratification." Puppies have even more reasons to use their mouths as they have no hands, are teething, and because their brief lives have been spent receiving comfort from nursing. It's easy to see why, to a puppy, mouthing becomes a source of pleasure. Yet, when a puppy becomes part of a human family, this behavior can be annoying and potentially dangerous. Don't assume your puppy will just "grow out of it" either. The opposite is true -- if the puppy realizes someone is intimidated by its biting, the biting is likely to increase.

In a litter, puppies use biting and nipping as a form of play and/or to establish dominance over other puppies in their litter. When a puppy uses its teeth on you, it may be putting you on the same level as another puppy. This is normal puppy behavior. It is also a behavior that needs to be modified so you and your puppy can both enjoy the time you spend together.

What can you do?

It is important to help a puppy understand that human flesh is sensitive, much more so than the skin of another puppy. Your puppy must learn that it really hurts humans when it bites or mouths them. This is teaching your puppy "bite inhibition." Puppies have sharp teeth and weak jaws. While puppies can cause discomfort when mouthing or biting, puppies cannot, generally speaking, seriously injure someone. An adult dog, even though it has duller teeth, has much more powerful jaws and can do serious harm.

If a child falls on a dog or sticks something in its eyes or ears, it is not surprising to us when a dog bites. We can, however, teach dogs not to bite as hard as they might otherwise. Dogs that have been taught "bite inhibition," are more prone to grab and release. Dogs that are not taught this valuable lesson are likely to bite more seriously, i.e., bite and hold or shake. Although teaching your puppy "bite inhibition" will not guarantee that no serious injuries will occur, it helps reduce the likelihood of severe injuries. Our skin is thin and vulnerable to dog bites, especially when the recipient of the bite tries to pull away, an instinctive behavior, while the dog has its teeth on them.

It is simple to teach a puppy bite inhibition. Each and every time your puppy starts biting or mouthing during play, or when you are trying to pet it, the second you feel its teeth testing your flesh, don't wait, say "OUCH!" and end the interaction, and get up and leave. This teaches the puppy that biting causes you, his playmate, pain and to go away. Instead of just walking away, you may choose, instead, to crate the puppy for 5 to 10 minutes. Over time, your puppy will learn that this is an unacceptable behavior.

It's the old "if you don't play by my rules, I won't play" routine, and the rule is you don't use your teeth to hurt me.

You should also teach your puppy to take or not take an object on command. To do this, hold a small handful of the puppy's dry food or a treat and say "take it" in a sweet tone of voice, giving the puppy one tidbit of food at a time. Next, close the rest of the food in your hand and say "no" in that same sweet tone of voice. When the puppy has not touched your hand for 3 to 5 seconds, say "take it," open your hand and give the puppy more pieces of food. This teaches the puppy that "no" means not to touch and "take it" means that it is okay to do so. You should practice this before each of your puppy's meals for at least 5 minutes.

If the pup has had ample opportunity to learn about biting and mouthing and is still doing it, it is time to add more incentive to learn bite inhibition to its training. You should start applying a safe repellent like Grannick's Bitter Apple or Chew Ban or even UNSCENTED spray deodorant on your hands (or any place else the dog is prone to bite) when the unwanted behavior is likely to occur. Then, again, as the puppy gets a mouthful of the horrible taste, as described above, say "Ouch!", end the interaction, and get up and leave! Again, alternatively, you can crate the dog for 5 to 10 minutes.

Do not use stiffer discipline without guidance from a qualified instructor familiar with operant conditioning behavior modification. An example of "overkill" is the alpha roll. Most young puppies simply do not need that level of discipline and you might even create more of a behavior problem using it.

Be consistent. It is not okay for your puppy to bite or mouth sometimes but not others. Inconsistency will confuse the puppy and make the learning process more lengthy and difficult.

Be sure to have a supply of toys around to satisfy the dog's need to chew. Hard rubber toys ("Kongs™", for instance), rope toys, soft sheepskin-like toys and/or knotted terrycloth allow your dog to exercise its gums and its mind.

Avoid games that may cause your puppy to mouth or bite. One particular game that many owners play with their puppies can greatly increase a dog's tendency to mouth and bite – that game is "tug-of-war" or "pull." Until a dog has developed an appropriate level of bite inhibition and will release on command ("Out") you should never play tug-of-war or pull games with your dog. You should also avoid encouraging your puppy to jump and grab at items with its teeth by holding them slightly out of reach and/or teasing the puppy with them.

Roughhousing and wrestling can also increase the probability of your puppy's biting and mouthing. You should not do it with your puppy and you should not allow others to do so either. These activities can significantly increase a dog's natural tendency to snap or bite at hands, arms, feet, or your face.

Also, when interacting with your puppy, avoid quick movements around its face. Avoid deliberately teasing your puppy by grabbing its muzzle or slapping at its face. This includes withdrawing your hand quickly as the puppy's mouth moves toward you, which could cause a grab and bite reaction in a puppy prone to biting.

Finally, all puppies need training, so the importance of a good basic obedience class cannot be emphasized strongly enough.

R.A.O.T. provides basic obedience classes that will help socialize your puppy and teach it basic obedience commands, like sit, stay, heel, and come. Call (901) 353-1805 for times, dates and locations.