

PUPPY MOUTHING AND BITE INHIBITION

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“Mouthiness” which some people incorrectly refer to as “biting”, is a common complaint of puppy adopters. Annoying as it is, it is a normal phase of puppy development. When “mouthing” other puppies and dogs with their teeth they will get feedback on how hard they are biting down. If they are gentle, play will continue. If they bite down hard play will stop, sometimes with a reprimand from their playmate. This is the puppy learning to use a gentle mouth and is called “bite inhibition.”

A dog with good bite inhibition is a much safer dog than one without. If something really bad happens to your dog, he is scared for example, or in pain, and turns and lashes out, good bite inhibition will prevent a serious bite. Dogs that get into fights with other dogs are safe dogs if they have good bite inhibition, no matter how noisy or scary the fight, there may be a few nicks and a torn ear but no serious damage. We hope all dogs at the dog park have good bite inhibition!

Puppies who have been taken away from their litter too early often have “hard mouths” and use their teeth on you with some pressure. They have not had the amount of feedback they need from their mother or siblings that this is unpleasant. So when they come to us we have to help them with this deficit. This problem is always resolvable, it just takes some time, consistency and lots of patience.

What not to do:

Never use any physical punishment to correct mouthing. Do not hit or grab your puppy’s mouth, roll your puppy on her back or jam fingers in her mouth. These methods can frighten your puppy and destroy the trust you are trying to build.

What to do:

Make sure your puppy has lots of toys and chews of different textures to put in his mouth. Play with him a lot with these toys and praise him lavishly for taking an interest in these rather than your fingers.

For some of our mouthier puppies we put toys and chews in their mouths even when we pet them.

Keep in mind that mouthing is a normal and useful behavior. Your puppy explores the world with his teeth. As you play with him, allow gentle mouthing. Puppies’ mouths vary, some are very gentle, some use more pressure, most are in the middle with harder mouthing as the puppy gets more excited and charged up.

It is our job to teach the puppy how delicate human skin is. Allow gentle mouthing but if the puppy clamps down hard say “ouch” in a deep offended voice (do not squeal, they will think you are a giant squeaky toy!) and become silent and still, so: “you do that and all the fun stops”. If your puppy takes the

hint and starts to play more gently continue to play with her with your happy voice and praise. If she comes back and mouths you with pressure, again repeat the “ouch” warning and then leave the room or put her in her crate for a one minute time out. If you do this consistently your puppy will learn to be careful with her teeth, she prefers to have you there to play with!

If you adopt your puppy when he/she is young, by 5-6 months of age the worst of this behavior should be over. However, if you adopt an older puppy you may have to work through this phase for a little while longer. This behavior is resolved over months, not weeks for most puppies. Your adolescent dog will often resort to mouthing when he gets over charged and excited. Calm him down and give more guidance, time him out if he cannot calm himself down, but always give a second chance.

Grabbing clothes:

Grabbing clothes or the leash are slightly different behaviors, but they are equally annoying and equally fixable. They are also more annoying if your puppy has a hard mouth and holds on or catches your skin under your clothes.

Remember dogs are predators i.e. they chase anything that moves. Hard to imagine your cute little fur ball puppy is a predator isn't it! When you walk by with flapping pants legs and skirts, or even bare legs for some puppies, you trigger the puppies chase instincts. So the puppy is exhibiting a normal behavior (even though it is annoying to us).

What to do?

Stand still and quiet when the puppy grabs your clothes, so you take the fun out of his game. For some puppies this alone will work. Praise and reward the puppy if he lets go. Other puppies are more persistent and will hold on or grab again. Keep some dog treats in your pocket and at this point ask your puppy to sit (he cannot sit and hang on at the same time) Reward your puppy for the sit and give him a toy to put in his mouth. If he comes back at you again, give him something else to do or give him a one minute time out in his crate.

Make sure you give your puppy lots of appropriate opportunities to use his chasing instincts. Throw balls and toys for him and teach him to retrieve.

Time outs

When you do a crate time out the puppy can be picked up and placed there, or he can be led there with a treat. He should have a nice chew toy in his crate. Your attitude should be calm and quiet, do not do this angrily; he is just being a puppy. If you worry about the crate being used as “punishment” in this situation it is not. The “punishment “ is that the puppy cannot be with you, his family, if he persists with these behaviors. It is equivalent to sending a child to their room, the room is not a punishment, it is not being with the family that is the punisher. Only make time outs a minute or two unless you feel the puppy is very over stimulated and needs a cool down nap.

Walking out the room and abandoning your puppy can work as a time out too, just for 30 seconds. However, you then have an unsupervised puppy in the house, so be careful! Walking out the room also does not help your puppy calm down in the way her crate does.

Tugging on the leash.

Again, very common in puppies. Take some of the fun out of it by not pulling back. Try and get your puppy to release the leash by offering a treat and asking for a sit. You can also carry a rope toy with you to offer as an alternative. If your puppy is a persistent leash tugger you can temporarily use a chain leash for walking. Chain is far less fun to tug on than fabric. As your puppy matures and your training kicks in, you can then go back to a fabric leash. Nearly all puppy adopters deal with this behavior, patience and consistency will get you through it. Working on leash walking exercises also keeps her busy (see the "Leash Walking" handout).

TIPS:

- NEVER physically punish your puppy for mouthing. NEVER try and grab your puppy's muzzle. Hands and voices should only bring good things.
- If you have a shy non mouthy puppy it is important to build the puppys confidence quickly and teach him to use his teeth. Play with him a lot with toys, play tug a lot. Massage his gums with something tasty like baby food or canned dog food. Puppies can only learn bite inhibition when they are young. Playing with a kind, well socialized older dog helps too.
- Children struggle a lot with this behavior in their puppy. Teaching children to be calm around their puppy helps. Try and help your children understand it is a normal phase the puppy goes through and it will get better. Ask for our hand out on good games for children to play with their puppies.
- Finding other puppies and dogs for your puppy to play with will give her a good outlet for her mouthiness as well as wearing her out. Remember, a tired dog is a "good" dog!
- If you adopt an older puppy or adolescent you may have to go through all the same routines. Mouthiness comes out in adolescent dogs when they get over excited or when they need more guidance. This sort of young dog needs loads of feedback on appropriate behavior in the form of reward-based training combined with a good predictable routine of exercise and down time.

Call me or email if you need more help: jane@cheerydogs.com

To sign up for classes check: www.Cheerydogs.com