

Mouthing Behaviors in Puppies and Dogs

Puppies and dogs use their mouths to explore and investigate their worlds, and they are very deliberate about it, so it is important for puppies and dogs to learn appropriate mouthing behavior around humans.

Puppies

Puppies have teeth like scalpels! Early in their lives, they spend a lot of time using their teeth, on their mother and on their littermates. However, not all puppies learn from their canine families to be gentle with their teeth (called bite inhibition), and even those that do learn from dogs cannot necessarily apply that information in their new (human) homes.

What does this mean to humans? Most puppies continue to vigorously explore their world with their mouth and teeth when they go home with their new owner. Wow, does it hurt when they nip and bite! What can the owner do to change this behavior in their pup?

1. Encourage other mouthing behaviors: smear your hands with peanut butter or banana or baby food, and encourage the pup to lick it off of your hands. This is one form of mouthing the puppy can do as an alternate to nipping or biting;
2. Make sure the puppy is getting enough normal chewing activity. Puppies need to chew things like bones, Nylabones, chew toys, stuffed frozen Kongs, or rawhides. (Some of the more powerful breeds, who can pull apart large rawhide pieces and choke, should not have rawhide). The pup should always have access to an item which is appropriate for them to vigorously chew, rather than your hands or feet!
3. Teach your pup to touch your hand with its nose. It's easy! Put your outstretched palm one inch to the side of your pup's face, and when he turns his head in that direction, praise and give a treat with your other hand. Do this about ten times, and your pup will learn quickly that moving towards and/or touching your hand with its nose is a way to earn a reward. Then, when your pup comes towards you, you can hold your hand out, and they will touch your hand with their nose instead of nipping or biting;
4. If your pup nips or bites, calmly put them down and/or walk away from them, putting a door in between you and them, for about a minute. Don't yell or try to frighten or discipline them, as this could teach them that you are a scary person to be avoided, or they could think this was a new game. Pups want to be with you, and if biting deprives them of that, biting should decrease as you consistently remove yourself from them each time they bite.
5. Avoid behaviors that will over-stimulate your puppy to bite, such as running and chasing games, tug games, and any other games which involve quickly-moving things that could be construed as prey to the pup. It is not a good training technique to engage the pup's prey instincts, then punish it for biting. Instead, teach alternate behaviors, such as sit, down, touch my hand, etc., and reward those behaviors over and over, until the pup knows them very well. That way, if the pup becomes over-stimulated, you can ask them to sit, and that will stop the unwanted behavior. Teach children these same rules, and do not leave them unsupervised with the puppy (or with any dog), ever.
6. Prevent mouthing by putting your puppy in its crate with a toy when it is too tired to perform behaviors it has been taught as alternatives to biting. Prevent it by giving the pup something to keep in its mouth when it is near you. If you consistently keep the pup's mouth occupied with appropriate items, while

rewarding good behavior, you will have a puppy who grows into a dog who understands how to use its mouth around people. Be careful about giving the pup something to bite after it has bitten you. Though you may think you are distracting the pup, you are actually rewarding them for biting.

Adolescent and Adult Dogs Who Mouth

Sadly, many, many pups do not learn proper dog-human mouthing interaction when they are little. The pup might not have been trained in good behaviors like sit or down, and perhaps it got a lot of attention when it bit or nipped. (The attention doesn't have to be pleasant to be rewarding to the puppy or dog. Even a series of "OW! Bad dog!!" interactions could be just the attention the dog likes.) Alternately, when the dog puts its teeth on a human and the human begins flapping their arms, jumping around, yelling, grabbing the dog's collar, the dog could find itself in the midst of what to it is a really fun game. Thus, the once-cute puppy can be turned into a grown dog that puts its teeth on people inappropriately.

Many dogs that put their mouths and teeth on people are mislabeled as aggressive. An aggressive dog is identified by its intent to harm, and is distinguished from an inappropriately mouthy dog by its history of deliberately harming someone (a bite history), by fearful body language (slinking, hackles up, growling, low-wagging or tucked tail), or by offensive body language (stiff posturing, forward-facing movement, high, stiff tail, possible wagging, raised hackles, growling, barking or lunging). An inappropriately mouthy dog can harm you, but its intent is not likely to be harmful, and its behavior is usually related to no training or for being, even accidentally, rewarded repeatedly for mouthing behaviors.

A dog is as precise with its mouth and teeth as humans are with their hands and fingers. With your thumb and index finger, you can caress, slightly pinch, or leave a bleeding wound. Dogs are the same way with their teeth. A dog who mouths you but who is not aggressive needs to learn the lesson it did not learn as a puppy; how to interact appropriately with humans with its mouth.

All of the above suggestions also apply to the adolescent (4-18 month-old) puppy, and to an adult dog. Teaching alternate behaviors and good behaviors can turn the mouthy dog into a dog who is a pleasant companion for a lifetime.