

## Ouch! My Puppy is Mouthing

When I ask puppy class parents to put their hands up if their puppy doesn't mouth - very rarely does anyone put their hand up, BUT when I ask 'who's puppy does mouth?', everyone puts their hand up, telling us that puppy mouthing is a very normal and natural behaviour.

So why do our puppies mouth? It is because it is their primary form of interaction when they're playing with their siblings. Let's go right back to when puppies were just starting to open their eyes and have a sense of the world around them at around three weeks old. Puppies' eyes and ears are now open so they start to explore and investigate the space around them and one week later they discover play. Puppies use their mouth when playing or interacting with their puppy brothers and sisters – they grab faces, legs, tummies, tails, shoulders and feet. They jump on their sleeping siblings to wake them and use all manner of growls, barks, head shakes and pounces when playing. Puppies come armed with a mouth full of very sharp puppy teeth. To another dog or puppy they are still sharp but don't hurt as much as when they connect with our sensitive, unprotected human skin.



When puppies use too much force with their bite, their playmate lets them know with a high-pitched yelp or by discontinuing play. Your puppy has come from a situation where she has been playing roughly with her mouth, jumping and leaping on her brothers and sisters and occasionally her mum (if she'll tolerate it) to your home. How do we help our puppies to understand that in our human homes, puppy mouthing on us is not acceptable? Well, the truth is that it's going to take until your puppy becomes more socially aware (at around 7 - 9 months of age) before she can interact more appropriately with you. Over the next few months, you're going to need to be very patient with your puppy. Be consistent but gentle as you help your puppy to redirect her natural desire to use her mouth to engage you in play and now redirect that mouth onto more appropriate activities.



**Here are some things that you can do, and if you practice consistently while giving gentle feedback to your puppy, the mouthing that you're feeling now will begin to lessen and eventually disappear by 7 to 9 months of age.**

**1. Redirect your puppy** to a more appropriate activity than mouthing your hands, arms, clothes or feet. Do this by re-directing his mouth onto a fun toy. Toys come to life and are fun when we're playing or holding the other end of them. Some puppies are happy to play with toys on their own but it's much more fun when you play a game with someone else so make that toy come to life. Wiggle it around, entice him to grab the toy and then use the toy as a substitute for putting his mouth on us. Have toys hidden around the house so that anytime you need to, you can grab a toy, wiggle it around and get him to happily play a game of tug, fetch or a game of 'catch it if you can'.



**2. Have containers of treats around your house** that you can use when you need to get from A to B without a puppy hanging off your clothes (or the kids' clothes). Sprinkle a little trail of food on the ground as you walk to redirect your puppy's mouthing onto finding a fun treat trail. The bonus is you also teach your puppy to walk calmly beside you.



**3. Have a whole variety of treat dispensing toys** and a puppy pen or baby gated area where your puppy can independently be working for her food. This keeps her busy. Food dispensing toys teach coordination and problem solving skills as she works out how to get the food to fall out. Try also long lasting chews – natural dehydrated meat chews are safer and healthier than cheap supermarket ones. Your puppy will be using both physical and mental activity which, in turn, results in a satisfied puppy who will be less likely to want to interact with you with her mouth.

**4. Good quality exercise.** While you wait for your puppy to be fully vaccinated, you can still provide him with good quality and appropriate exercise. Play a game of catch me or fetch in your yard, do some training exercises at home (which are mentally stimulating), go for short walks on the pavement around the block, let puppy sniff to his heart's content or go for a drive in the car. But do avoid areas frequented by other dogs, such as parks. In fact, getting out and about prior to 16 weeks of age is essential to ensure your puppy is adequately socialised and therefore equipped to feel at ease in our human world.



**5. Give gentle feedback to your puppy** if she does put her mouth on you. Sounding a little sad while saying “ouch puppy” and briefly disengaging from play for just a few seconds is enough to get your puppy thinking about what may have gone wrong. Don't be surprised though when puppy jumps straight back in with her mouth and begins interacting in mouthy play again, despite feedback, as this is exactly what puppies do when they're playing with other puppies. It takes hundreds and hundreds of times giving feedback before puppies finally get the message. As she gets older and more socially aware, your puppy will have so much more control over her behaviour and how her behaviour is affecting others. Be patient. In time mouthing will disappear.



This part of your puppy's life is going to go by so quickly that before you know it you will have a beautiful adult dog. A dog who has excellent bite inhibition because of all the things that you've done from this time until adult hood to help her learn more appropriate ways of interacting with humans.

So how do you tell the difference between puppy mouthing for play or actual biting? Generally the difference is all in the body language and context associated with the behaviour. When puppies are playing, they may use growls, headshaking, show their teeth and snap but your puppy will be doing this while still having a soft, wriggly body and relaxed open mouth. If, on the other hand, you approach your puppy while he still has an item, is on his bed/furniture or is eating and he becomes still, tense, growls, shows his teeth, snaps or bites with intention, your puppy is communicating that he is not comfortable with your approach or what you are doing. Likewise if you pick your puppy up or try to stop your puppy from doing something and he puts his mouth on you to tell you to stop, this is clear communication from your pup that he is not happy or is uncomfortable. Listen to your puppy, stop what you were doing and call your instructor so that together we can work on a training solution to help your puppy feel more comfortable in those situations.



The take-home message is that puppy mouthing is very normal and natural. It is the way that puppies interact with their playmates and the world around them. When they come into our human world, we become their playmates. The good news is that by 7 - 9 months of age, puppy mouthing should have disappeared entirely as our puppies start to become more socially aware adolescent dogs. So be kind and patient with her as she goes through this transition period, follow the five steps above to make the transition smoother for all of you and enjoy this time with your puppy because she will grow very quickly into a beautiful adult dog.