

# Mouthing & Play Biting

## The Motivation

There can be numerous motivating factors for puppies and dogs to bite and mouth. Oftentimes in puppies, biting is done in attempts to initiate play or to soothe teething. Mouthing can also be done in attempts to elicit attention or to explore their environment. The act of play biting is normal and natural in puppies, so it is important to help we teach them where it is appropriate.

## Prevention & Management

Play biting and mouthing is best managed when playing with your puppy properly. Keep play low to discourage the chance of your puppy jumping up for the toy and accidentally getting skin. Also, take breaks from play for your dog to come back down from the excitement of play. When you are unable to redirect mouthing to a toy, confine or manage the environment to prevent your puppy access to inappropriate mouthing objects. You can also let your puppy have access to plenty of toys, so they will be less likely to put their mouth on your hands, clothes, or shoes. To keep toys interesting, they can be rotated and swapped out.

## Problem Solving

The most effective way to reduce play biting and mouthing is to remove attention when the undesired behavior is occurring. It is important to recognize when your puppy's teeth make contact with skin or clothing as this is a sign to begin redirection to a toy or different task.

1. Try to withhold vocalization such as yelping when your puppy does mouth or bite. Often, vocalization causes the puppy to become more excited about that style of play, become unintentionally reinforced for the behavior, or become fearful during play.
2. When you feel teeth touch skin or clothing, slowly remove yourself from the situation. This can include holding your arms behind your back, standing up, or stepping behind/putting your puppy behind a physical barrier. When done consistently, the puppy will learn play stops when mouthing begins.
3. Pauses from play only need to last 2-3 seconds before play can resume.
4. The puppy can also be refocused by asking for a sit or a different behavior which can be rewarded with a toy or treat.



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## Important Notes

Positive punishment such as verbal or physical reprimands are counterproductive in establishing polite, proper play behavior. By grabbing your dog's muzzle, pinching your dog's lip, or shouting at your dog, you are not teaching the type of play you would like him to engage in. Inadvertently, your dog may become weary of your hands and such actions may contribute to the development of aggression. Your dog may learn to distrust you as you have treated him unpredictably. If your puppy has a pattern of becoming mouthy at a certain time of day, you can proactively manage his behavior by providing proper outlets or removing access to inappropriate targets.

Playing tug with your dog is also a fun activity as long as there are rules in place to keep it safe. We often recommend to only initiate tug when your dog is standing or sitting calmly in front of you (not jumping up) and that if teeth touch skin the game is paused. Tug is not an activity that creates an aggressive dog but instead creates a proper outlet for them to engage in mouthy play.



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