

Mouthing, Nipping and Play Biting in Adult Dogs



Most pet parents don't enjoy dogs who bite, chew and mouth their hands, limbs or clothing during play and interaction. The jaws of an adult dog can cause significantly more pain than puppy teeth, and adult dogs can inadvertently cause injury while mouthing. Mouthing is often more difficult to suppress in adult dogs because adults aren't as sensitive to our reactions as puppies are, and they're usually more difficult to control physically because of their size.

Adult dogs who mouth people probably never learned not to do so during puppyhood. It's likely that their human parents didn't teach them how to be gentle or to chew toys instead.

Is It Playful Mouthing or Aggressive Behavior?

Most mouthing is normal dog behavior. But some dogs bite out of fear or frustration, and this type of biting can indicate problems with aggression. It's sometimes difficult to tell the difference between normal play mouthing and mouthing that precedes aggressive behavior. In most cases, a playful dog will have a relaxed body and face. His muzzle might look wrinkled, but you won't see a lot of tension in his facial muscles. Playful mouthing is usually less painful than more serious, aggressive biting. Most of the time, an aggressive dog's body will look stiff. He may wrinkle his muzzle and pull back his lips to expose his teeth. Serious, aggressive bites are usually quicker and more painful than those delivered during play.

If you suspect that your dog's biting fits the description of aggressive behavior, please consult a qualified professional, such as a Certified Applied Animal Behaviorist (CAAB or ACAAB) or a board-certified veterinary behaviorist (Dip ACVB). If you can't find a behaviorist in your area, you can seek help from a

Certified Professional Dog Trainer (CPDT), but be sure that the trainer you choose is qualified to help you. Determine whether she or he has extensive education and experience successfully treating aggression, since this expertise isn't required for CPDT certification. Please see our article, [Finding Professional Behavior Help](#), to locate a behaviorist or a CPDT in your area.

How to Minimize Your Dog's Mouthing and Nipping

Dogs spend a great deal of time playing, chewing and investigating objects. They also enjoy playing with people, of course. Puppies chew on our fingers and toes, and they investigate people's bodies with their mouths and teeth. This kind of behavior may seem cute when your dog is seven weeks old, but it's not so endearing when he's two or three years old—and much bigger!

It's important to help your dog learn to curb his mouthy behavior. There are various ways to teach this lesson, some better than others. The ultimate goal is to train your dog to stop mouthing and biting people altogether. However, the first and most important objective is to teach him that people have very sensitive skin, so he must be very gentle when using his mouth during play.

Bite Inhibition: Teach Your Dog to Be Gentle

Bite inhibition refers to a dog's ability to control the force of his mouthing. A puppy or dog who hasn't learned bite inhibition with people doesn't recognize the sensitivity of human skin, so he bites too hard, even in play. Some behaviorists and trainers believe that a dog who has learned to use his mouth gently when interacting with people will be less likely to bite hard and break skin if he ever bites someone in a situation apart from play—like when he's afraid or in pain.

Young dogs usually learn bite inhibition during play with other dogs. If you watch a group of dogs playing, you'll see plenty of chasing, pouncing and wrestling. Dogs also bite each other all over. Every now and then, a dog will bite his playmate too hard. The victim of the painful bite yelps and usually stops playing. The offender is often taken aback by the yelp and also stops playing for a moment. However, pretty soon both playmates are back in the game. Through this kind of interaction, dogs learn to control the intensity of their bites so that no

one gets hurt and the play can continue without interruption. If dogs can learn from each other how to be gentle, they can learn the same lesson from people.

When you play with your dog, let him mouth on your hands. Continue play until he bites especially hard. When he does, immediately give a high-pitched yelp, as if you're hurt, and let your hand go limp. This should startle your dog and cause him to stop mouthing you, at least momentarily. (If yelping seems to have no effect, you can say "Too bad!" or "You blew it!" in a stern voice instead.) Praise your dog for stopping or for licking you. Then resume play. If your dog bites you hard again, yelp again. Repeat these steps no more than three times within a 15-minute period.

If you find that yelping alone doesn't work, you can switch to a time-out procedure. Time-outs are often effective for curbing mouthy behavior in adolescent and adult dogs. When your dog delivers a hard bite, yelp loudly. Then, when he startles and turns to look at you or looks around, remove your hand. Either ignore him for 10 to 20 seconds or, if he starts mouthing on you again, get up and move away for 10 to 20 seconds. If necessary, leave the room. After the short time-out, return to your dog and encourage him to play with you again. It's important to teach him that gentle play continues, but painful play stops. Play with your dog until he bites hard again. When he does, repeat the sequence above. When your dog isn't delivering really hard bites anymore, you can tighten up your rules a little. Require your dog to be even gentler. Yelp and stop play in response to moderately hard bites. Persist with this process of yelping and then ignoring your dog or giving him a time-out for his hardest bites. As those disappear, do the same for his next-hardest bites, and so on, until your dog can play with your hands very gently, controlling the force of his mouthing so that you feel little or no pressure at all.

What to Do Next: Teach Your Dog That Teeth Don't Belong on Human Skin

After you teach your dog to be gentle with his mouth, you can move on to the next step: teaching him to avoid mouthing people altogether. Try the following tips:

- Substitute a toy or chew bone when your dog tries to gnaw on fingers or toes.

- Dogs often mouth on people's hands when stroked, patted and scratched. If your dog gets all riled up when you pet him, distract him by feeding him small treats from your other hand. This will help your dog get used to being touched without mouthing.
- Encourage noncontact forms of play, such as fetch and tug-of-war, rather than wrestling and rough play with your hands. Teaching your dog to play tug-of-war prepares him for dealing with arousal and frustration. To keep tug-of-war safe and fun for you and your dog, you'll need to follow strict rules. Once your dog can play tug safely, keep tug toys in your pocket or in a place where you can easily access them. If he starts to mouth you, you can immediately redirect him to the tug toy. Ideally, he'll start to anticipate and look for a toy when he feels like mouthing.
- Teach your dog impulse control with specific exercises such as sit, wait and leave it.
- If your dog bites at your feet and ankles, carry his favorite tug toy in your pocket. Whenever he ambushes you, instantly stop moving your feet. Take out the tug toy and wave it enticingly. When your dog grabs the toy, start moving again. If you don't happen to have the toy available, just freeze and wait for your dog to stop mouthing you. The second he stops, praise and get a toy to reward him. Repeat these steps until your dog gets used to watching you move around without going after your feet.
- Provide plenty of interesting and new toys and things to chew so that your dog will play with them instead of gnawing on you or your clothing.
- Provide plenty of opportunities for your dog to play with other friendly, vaccinated dogs. He can expend a lot of his energy playing with them and have less need to play roughly with you.
- Use a time-out procedure, just like the one described above, but change the rules a little. Instead of giving your dog time-outs for hard biting, start to give him time-outs every time you feel his teeth touch your skin.
 - The instant you feel your dog's teeth touch you, give a high-pitched yelp. Then immediately walk away from him. Ignore him for 30 to 60 seconds. If your dog follows you or continues to bite and nip at you, leave the room

for 30 to 60 seconds. (Be sure that the room is “dog-proofed” before you leave your dog alone in it. Don’t leave him in an area with things he might destroy or things that might hurt him.) After the brief time-out, return to the room and calmly resume whatever you were doing with your dog.

- Alternatively, you can keep a leash attached to your dog when you’re around to supervise him. Let the leash drag on the floor. Instead of leaving the room when your dog mouths you, you can immediately take hold of his leash and calmly lead him to a quiet area. When you get there, tether him to a heavy piece of furniture or put him behind a baby gate to confine him. Then leave the area or turn your back to your dog for the brief time-out. When the time-out is over, untie him or release him, and resume whatever you were doing.
- If a time-out isn’t viable or effective, consider using a taste deterrent. Spray the deterrent on areas of your body and clothing that your dog likes to mouth before you start interacting with him. If he mouths you or your clothing, stop moving and wait for him to react to the bad taste of the deterrent. Praise him lavishly when he lets go of you. Apply the deterrent to your body and clothes for at least two weeks. After two weeks of being punished by the bitter taste every time he mouths you, your dog will likely learn to inhibit his mouthy behavior.
- If your dog shows no reaction when you yelp, does not stop mouthing when you use time-out and isn’t deterred by bad tastes, another possibility is to make it unpleasant for him when he mouths. The following technique should only be used as a last resort—only if nothing else has worked. Carry a small can of peppermint or spearmint breath spray in your pocket so that it’s always handy. The instant your dog starts to mouth you, yell “Ouch!” and squirt a short burst of the breath spray directly into your dog’s mouth. He won’t like the taste, and he really won’t like the sensation of the spray. Your action should be swift and smooth. This tactic won’t work if it deteriorates into a wrestling match between you and your dog—and it definitely won’t work if your dog becomes aggressive or afraid of you. You should only need to use the spray a few times. If you’re uncomfortable using punishment and can’t implement it quickly and without struggling with your dog, it’s best to use the

other procedures recommended here or seek professional help. (Please see our article, [Finding Professional Behavior Help](#), to locate a qualified expert near you.)

- Because mouthing issues can be challenging to work with, don't hesitate to enlist the help of a Certified Professional Dog Trainer (CPDT). A CPDT will offer group or private classes that can give you and your dog lots of assistance with mouthing. Please see our article, [Finding Professional Behavior Help](#), to find a CPDT in your area.

General Precautions

- Avoid waving your fingers or toes in your dog's face or slapping the sides of his face to entice him to play. Doing these things can actually encourage your dog to bite your hands and feet.
- Do not discourage your dog from playing with you in general. Play builds a strong bond between a dog and his human family. You want to teach your dog to play gently rather than not at all.
- Avoid jerking your hands or feet away from your dog when he mouths. Jerky movements might seem like a game to your dog and encourage him to jump forward and grab at you. It's much more effective to let your hands or feet go limp so that they aren't much fun to play with.
- Slapping or hitting dogs for playful mouthing can cause them to bite harder. They usually react by playing more aggressively. Physical punishment can also make your dog afraid of you—and it can even cause real aggression. Avoid scruff shaking, whacking your dog on the nose, sticking your fingers down his throat and all other punishments that might hurt or scare him.