

# NIP MOUTHING IN THE BUD!!

Do you have a puppy that would rather use your arm than a bone as a chew toy? While it is normal for puppies to use their mouths when playing with each other, this behavior becomes a problem when it carries over into their interactions with us.



Many breeds are genetically inclined to use their mouths to do a job. Sporting breeds are the retrievers and the carriers of items. Working and the Herding breeds use their mouths to control the movements of humans or other animals. Terrier breeds are motion-activated and will chase anything they perceive as small rodents, including your feet. Understanding these tendencies in your own puppy, whether a mixed breed or purebred, can help in dealing with the problem of mouthing.

At a very young age, puppies begin to learn how much pressure with their mouths is too much by the reactions of their mothers and littermates. When puppies play, they chomp each other's ears and chew each other's necks until one bites down too hard. Then, the bitten puppy lets out a piercing "iey, iey, ieeyyy" (referred to as the wounded puppy noise), gets up and walks away. This teaches the biting puppy that when he is too rough, play ends. Since dogs are social animals, this in itself is a correction. The puppy learns bite inhibition through these playfighting sessions when allowed to remain with his litter until at least seven weeks of age. This is one of the most important lessons puppies carry into adulthood, especially concerning their relationship with people.

As a new puppy owner, it is necessary to establish what is and isn't acceptable behavior from the very first day. Puppies benefit from expectations that are consistently enforced. Teething lasts from four to six months, so mouthing is quite common then. If mouthing has not gotten under control by the time the puppy enters adolescence at six months, not only will you have a less cooperative teenager to handle, but a larger, stronger jaw to deal with as well. Mouthing can become a way for your puppy to try to control you, allowing him to take that first step towards assuming a leadership role within your home. The following techniques are recommended for most puppies up to four months of age, depending upon their size and the severity of the problem.

Initially, a puppy will use his mouth to investigate his environment. Throughout the teething process, it gives a puppy relief to chew on all manner of items, soft and hard. Providing appropriate items for your puppy to focus his attentions on can sometimes be a simple way of solving a mouthing problem. Indestructible chew toys like large nylon bones or hard rubber Kongs™ can provide a positive outlet for mouthing. Large rawhide bones and carrots can be placed in the freezer and given to a teething puppy. Braided fiber knotted tugs dipped in chicken broth or water and then frozen are also a good option.

If your puppy is chewing on you, the moment the pressure increases use your "wounded puppy" noise leaving your hand in their mouth. Once the pressure is released, slowly remove your hand. You may wish to offer the back of your hand for your puppy to lick. By doing this, not only are you teaching him that your skin is tender, but also that you expect a sign of deference (licking your hand) from him. Praise him in a calm manner if his cooperation is immediate and offer him an appropriate chew toy. Do not offer a toy while your hand is still in his mouth, or you will be rewarding the wrong behavior. You may also choose to assign a command like "no bite" or "no mouth," so he will associate his behavior with your correction. This method should work with the average, eager-to-please puppy. For piranha puppies, a squirt of breath spray (such as Binaca™) in the mouth when mouthing may serve as a negative reinforcer. To avoid the minty freshness, the puppy will keep his mouth closed.

Does your puppy start mouthing you if you don't play when HE wants to? Is he constantly tripping you up or trying to play tug-o-war with the leash when you're walking in the direction YOU want to go? Is he uncooperative when you ask him to do something like get off the couch or wait for you to go through the doorway first? If your answer is "yes" to these questions, you may have a bossy or dominant puppy. With this type of puppy, you may need to exercise a little more discipline.





Discipline does not mean physical punishment, it means correcting an unwanted behavior and teaching a new, more desirable one. In this case, we want a puppy that understands by our reactions that his behavior is unacceptable. Since he may not look for as much guidance from you, the puppy needs to learn to accept you as a leader. The first step in letting a bossy puppy know you are in charge is to handle him in a variety of ways. Touching the paws and tail of a confident puppy often stimulates a mouthing response. Rather than forcing him to accept being handled, the goal is to increase his comfort level. Touch a toe and give a treat if he has not already mouthed you. If he does, use your "no mouth" or similar command and try again. Continue on until you are able to gently squeeze his paw in a non-threatening manner. This will help later with nail trimming as well.

As a prelude to good dental care, your puppy should also get used to fingers in his mouth. Begin by sliding your finger coated in tuna fish oil or one of the commercially prepared dog toothpastes, into the pouch created by his jowls on the side of his muzzle. Try to briefly massage his gums, praising all the while. If this presents no problem, slip back towards the molars, actually letting your finger run over the surface of the tooth. If, at this point, your puppy bites down too hard, use one of the corrections previously mentioned, again offering the back of your hand to lick.

With a puppy that is really being obnoxious, a more direct approach may be needed. For this method, your puppy should be wearing a well-fitted buckle collar. Should he begin to mouth you, slip your fingers under his collar just under the jaw on either side. Looking directly into his eyes, say "no mouth" or similar command in a growly voice. Wait for him to look away or to put his ears back slightly as a sign of submission. Release him and walk away or briefly close him in another room for a few minutes as a "time out." There is no need to shake or strike the puppy, he will get the message.

For the lunging, snapping puppy, you need to be aware of how you may be motivating him to mouth. Beware that movement inflames the behavior. Never encourage games involving your hands or feet as targets. Hold your leash so that it never dangles. Until you have started to retrain your puppy, it is a good idea to avoid wearing loose, flowing garments. It is natural to raise our arms when we feel physically threatened. Unfortunately with a lunging puppy, this may lure him closer to your face.

Instead of pulling your hand away when your puppy mouths you, push your hand a little further into the puppy's mouth. This creates a bit of discomfort causing him to "spit" you out. You regain control of the situation by reversing his action. Once your hand has been released, praise. Spraying your hands and leash (cotton web preferably) with a commercially prepared, bitter tasting spray can act as a deterrent. Diluted lemon juice can be used in a pinch.

If the above methods don't work, you may need to become a "statue." Instead of your puppy playing "tag, you're it," cross your arms across your chest, turn your back to your puppy, and become motionless. When you do not respond, your puppy gets no reward for his behavior. When done consistently, this should extinguish the "game." This method also works for a puppy that tries to initiate games of "tug-o-war." If the leash goes slack instead of pulling back, the fun goes out of it for the puppy.



If you are having a serious biting problem, especially with an older puppy, consult your veterinarian and consider bringing in a private trainer or behaviorist to help you solve the problem. To find a trainer, ask your veterinarian for a referral or call a local obedience club or humane society. Ask what methods they use and speak to former clients if possible. Contact The Association of Pet Dog Trainers (APDT) at [www.apdt.com](http://www.apdt.com) for a list of trainers in your area. Rule out any trainer that advocates harsh corrections, as they can have a long-lasting negative effect on your relationship with your puppy. They could make matters worse. Guidance and consistency are key when training, even when those needle-sharp teeth are gnawing away at your patience.

Deirdre Ryan Rivas, ©ASPCA