



## RSPCA School for Dogs Information Sheet

# Mouthing

This is one of the most common questions we get asked!

Nipping, mouthing and biting in young dogs are generally forms of social interactions used in play, exploration and for attention seeking. It is a normal canine behaviour, even though it is unacceptable to us.

### Bite inhibition

Pups usually learn to moderate the strength of their bite when they are still in the company of their mother and siblings. During play, if they bite too hard, it usually results in a termination of the play. A puppy with insufficient opportunities to learn this from their littermates can often result in a lack of bite inhibition.



Puppy biting will not just 'get better' as your puppy grows up. It can actually get worse as there is much more force and frustration in their biting/mouthing.

It is best to set up a no teeth policy from the day your puppy comes home. That is, no teeth are to make contact, no matter how soft, with skin or clothing of any human.

### Be proactive

Don't wait for your puppy to mouth and bite you! If you know when they will do this behaviour, make sure you have something which you can put in their mouth before they contact your skin.

Provide lots of things your puppy CAN chew and encourage him/her to do so. Place part of their meal in treat toys such as Kong's and other food puzzle toys. Interact with him when he is playing and encourage him to take the toy in his mouth. A toy may not be intrinsically interesting on its own, but if you show him how it works and play with the toy, its value will increase in your puppy's eyes.

If your puppy goes to bite or chew on your hands or trousers, try and get their attention with the toy. Make the toy interesting and roll it or toss it gently away from you.

### What do I do if my puppy mouths when being handled?

It is important to get your pup get used to handling by humans; however mouthing can often occur when puppies are touched/cuddled/handled. When your puppy has played and is calm, before she goes to sleep gently stroke her from head to tail in continuous gentle strokes. Stroke the ears with one fingertip; stroke the limbs and tail with one or two fingers (more as your puppy grows).

Eventually you will be stroking the muzzle and the stomach. Ensure to give lots of praise to your pup while they are calm and not mouthing you. If they start to mouth during any of this process redirect towards a toy, if that is unsuccessful use a short time out.



## RSPCA School for Dogs Information Sheet

To set your pup up for success you can also hold the end of a chew (such as a pig's ear or rawhide stick) and allow your puppy to chew on it, whilst you are gently stroking him. Once you let your puppy have the chew, don't take it back off them.

Encourage all family members to practice handling your puppy in the same manner described above.

Try to limit the interactions with your puppy when she is boisterous and over excited.

### Puppies mouthing other puppies

Mouthing also often occurs when puppies interact with each other. This can be appropriate if it is gentle and reciprocal. Be prepared to interrupt if the play gets too rough or starts to be controlled by one dog. Give both the dogs' time to calm down; generally 30-60 sec is enough. It is better to do a few short play sessions and keep it to appropriate interactions than to allow a free for all. Puppies learn bite inhibition and good manners by playing together and it is an important developmental stage.



### Using 'time out'

If your redirection to toys is not working, the next step is to be clear and consistent in providing an immediate time out whenever contact between puppy teeth and human skin is made, no matter how accidental. Remove your puppy and give him a short time out (or remove yourself to the closest room and close the door behind you): 30 seconds is enough. After time out the puppy has to have an opportunity to 'try again' - this is a crucial step in learning what is right. However be prepared to do repeated time-outs until they understand. Your puppy will quickly learn that mouthing humans stops the game and results in social isolation.

If your puppy has already been practicing mouthing interactions, be prepared for him/her to complain about the change of rules by whining, barking, scratching and mouthing. Be persistent and consistent so that you end up with a polite dog.

### Some things we don't do

- ✗ Scream, yell or squeal - this may heighten your puppy's sense of arousal and can increase the likelihood of the mouthing happening again with more enthusiasm.
- ✗ Say 'No' - No is only the answer to a question and doesn't let your puppy know what the RIGHT thing to be doing is.
- ✗ Use any form of force or punishment. You will confuse your puppy and may nurture other inappropriate behaviours, such as appeasement wetting every time he/she sees you.



## RSPCA School for Dogs Information Sheet

Mouthing is an interspecies communication problem; we just don't play like puppies so we need to teach our puppies how to play appropriately with us.

© RSPCA School for Dogs 2018