



## Ten Things you need to Know about Mouthing and Biting

The aim of teaching bite inhibition in a puppy is to teach it to bite with the least amount of pressure necessary and only when it feels it has to. I would never expect a dog to never bite; it must always have its only form of self defence intact.

### 1. Mouthing

This behaviour is where a puppy places its mouth, teeth included, over your hands or body parts to chew on. The puppy uses its mouth to do everything from playing to grabbing to pulling. As much as the teeth hurt, you should notice that there is not enormous amount of pressure applied when it mouths. When the teeth graze your hands, it is mostly because of their hooked, sharp points and not because they are seriously trying to hurt you. The majority of puppies mouth, however there is a small percentage that does cause intentional harm; these are rare cases.

Mouthing is predominantly a juvenile behaviour and is rarely seen in adult dogs.

### 2. Biting

This behaviour is where a puppy or adult dog uses its teeth to grab at your hands or body parts. There is pressure involved but not enough to cause serious damage. You may also notice that it is a little more aroused when it does this. Its body language still appears soft and playful even though it is involving its mouth in the game. The eyes appear soft and the tongue is often hanging out but it has a wilder look in its eye. When puppies or dogs are play biting, they tend to use their entire mouth and not just the front teeth. The molars are used for gnawing and the front teeth are used for holding and tugging.

### 3. Biting with the intention to cause harm

This behaviour is where a puppy or adult dog applies a lot of pressure to hands or body parts with intention to cause damage and harm. This is usually as an act of self-defence, poor self-control or aggression. Nearly all puppies mouth and bite as an act of play and do not mean any harm. Some however do and this is why it important to understand the difference and how to address it.

When the dog wants to bite to cause harm, it is never smiling and wobbling its bottom; it means business. If you watch puppies when they mouth and bite, they are wiggling all over like it is a huge game to them and the aim is to make you squeak! AS mentioned above, they have open mouths, tongues hanging out slightly, tails carried softly and wagging and their eyes are really soft and doe like.

Dogs which want to bite are clearly saying 'go away' or 'I don't like it' and do not appear to be engaging with you or trying to have fun.

The signs dog show when they are about to bite or have intention to bite are a stiffened body, a hard stare, possible raising of hair on neck and back, toes are stiff and pointing forward, mouth is clamped shut or slight showing of front



teeth, puffing out of cheeks occurs, freezing up of the body is seen, intense lip licking also occurs and tail is very erect. The teeth predominantly used for biting are the very front teeth and these are used for grabbing and snapping and warning.

Growling, snarling, lip curling and barking tend to all be signs seen just before the act of biting occurs. The signals mentioned above come a lot earlier, providing you learn to recognise them from the beginning.

Please be aware that some dogs bypass all these early signs and go straight to biting. This occurs if they have consistently been ignored during times of stress, have been punished aggressively for showing these signs or are placed in an immediate life threatening situation.

On the whole, the majority of dogs will try to avoid conflict if given the chance.

#### **4. Look at the situation your puppy is in when the mouthing and biting is occurring.**

If it's mouthing gently and then starting to bite harder when you restrain it or pat it, then this is telling you it is uncomfortable with being held. You will need to work on this area but you most certainly should not ignore the cause for it. The mouthing and biting is one way a puppy can express how it feels and what it wants or does not want. Desensitising and positive association with certain situations can help reduce the urge to want to mouth and bite.

If it is mouthing and biting gently while playing and is suddenly getting more intense, it is telling you that it is now out of control, is highly aroused and unable to control the situation. It is up to you here to end the game as the puppy simply does not have that ability yet.

#### **5. Mouthing and biting is an important part of puppy development and all puppies need to do it in order to learn to control themselves.**

When watching puppies play, almost the entire time they are engaging, their mouth is open and grabbing, pulling, feeling, playing, tagging, and nipping, chewing, licking, snapping and biting. This is because the pups are looking for feedback from the other dog and learning vital survival skills.

Puppies' baby teeth are not cemented in the jaw but they are very pointy and sharp and this is to maximise a reaction without having the pressure to back it up. By having pointy, sharp teeth, the reaction is bigger because they hurt so they get immediate feedback from the other dog that it was not acceptable.

The more attempts at play, mouthing and biting the puppy has, the more feedback it gets from others as to whether its mouthing was soft enough or not. The puppy's aim is to obviously continue play so it must learn to control the intensity of its bite to keep going.

If puppies do not get enough opportunity to practice mouthing and biting, then they may never learn good control over their mouth and how to play fairly. They may not learn to control their impulses, the strength in their bite or the frequency of their bite. Humans can teach some of these skills to a certain degree, but other dogs are by far much better at it and a lot more accurate.



### **6. Puppies rarely continue to mouth and bite when they are adults.**

Once puppies have finished teething (they lose all their baby teeth which are replaced by permanent adult teeth) they settle down quite quickly. This is often noticed between the 4-7 months of age.

Mouthing and biting intensifies during this stage but soon dramatically drops off once teething is over. It then slowly dissipates over the few months after that. The reason it intensifies is because the pup is suffering a lot of discomfort as the teeth erupt through the gums so the only way to cope with it is to chew on everything and anything it can get its mouth on.

Mouthing and biting is really a developmental stage and if you do nothing about it, it will really go away on its own.

Some dogs continue to gently mouth when they are older because of their breed or because they have been encouraged or reinforced to keep it up. The mouthing though is usually very soft and mostly gumming rather than grabbing with teeth.

This can still be stopped simply by ignoring the behaviour and/or giving the dog something else to do.

### **7. There are some simple exercises you can do to reduce mouthing and biting but nothing is as good as real life interaction with other dogs.**

Humans are not dogs and we react differently so the feedback we give is not really accurate and sometimes it's even confusing.

One way to reduce it is to allow play with other pups or dogs as often as possible in the first 5 months of its life.

I would encourage play with other dogs up to 4 times a week in the early stages.

If the play is with another adult dog, you need to ensure the dog is capable of playing nicely and has good impulse control.

When YOU play with the pup, encourage it to chew on its toys rather than your hands.

Keep tossing, rolling, squeaking, dragging and moving the toys so the puppy focuses on it. Each time it goes for its toy, reinforce it for this behaviour.

When it goes to chew on your hands, yelp suddenly and then walk away, end the game, withdraw from it momentarily. This will give it some form of feedback that the play was too rough and unacceptable.

Also remember that you can easily be encouraging mouthing and biting through your actions so watch what you do with your hands and body. If you are flapping them in front of its face, or grabbing at it all the time, then this could be misinterpreted as play initiation. Again, watch what other puppies do when they want to engage in play. They run past each other, they grab hair, they tease, and they push with their feet and muzzles. This turns on the mouthing and biting instinct.



If you have children, especially toddlers, you will need to watch them very carefully as they are walking, talking puppies in the shape of a human. These two cannot be left alone together at all and ALL play between them must be supervised. Toddlers flap, squeal, run, crawl, move lots and are ever enticing.

Avoid over stimulating games like tug-o-war or wrestling. This only encourages more mouthing and biting and does not teach self-control. As your puppy matures and has learned a few skills, these games can be played, providing your pup actually enjoys it and is able to stop itself the moment you signal it to do so. If you cannot get your puppy to stop the game immediately, then I highly recommend you do not play it at all.

If children live in the same household, I would not be playing rough games at all.

Calmness is the behaviour that needs to be reinforced. Dogs have way too much energy for the majority of times so we need to be focusing more on the down time rather than encourage manic behaviour.

### **8. Always ensure your puppy has something suitable to chew on; something that will satisfy its urge to mouth and bite.**

Objects that are really suitable are rubber toys (Kongs, Bopperoos, Orkas, Busy Buddies, Wubbers and Pimple Balls, ), raw meaty bones, rope tugs, cardboard boxes and toilet roll inserts, plastic milk bottles, Aussie Dog Treat Balls, Turbo Chooks, Bungy Balls ice cream containers, Slapathongs and balls, rubber tyres, etc.

There are many suitable toys out on the market but beware of toys that can encourage predatory behaviour. Avoid toys that resemble other small animals or toys that have arms, limbs and faces. These can sometimes be mistaken for children. Remember that dogs tend to generalise objects quite a bit so in the heat of the moment, a pink, limbed toy could easily be mistaken for a baby or a small furry toy could be mistaken for a Guinea Pig or even a kitten.

Also avoid cheap plastic toys as they tend to frustrate puppies more than encourage chewing. Small plastic pieces can also be broken off causing cuts to the mouth or blockages internally. If you are using plastic items like bottles, toss them out as soon as you start to see jagged edges on them.

### **9. Never grab your puppy or dog by the muzzle to try to stop it from mouthing or biting.**

Grabbing at muzzles will only teach your pup to fear your hand. This also goes for hitting on the nose, tapping with a newspaper or yelling or growling.

You do need to remember that occasionally you will need to check its mouth, its eyes, trim hair, show the vet its teeth or even medicate it. If your pup becomes intimidated by your hand because of muzzle grabbing and punishing, you will then have enormous difficulty accessing those areas when you need to. You also run the risk of creating a head shy dog where it turns to seriously bite each time you go near its head.

### **10. Teach your puppy to settle through massage so it learns to be calm with touching and handling.**

When handling your puppy, keep your hands in constant contact with its body. Avoid placing them on and off as this increases the energy between your hands and the pup and also over stimulates it.



Instead, keep your hands on the body and move them slowly and rhythmically, with a little pressure so you can feel the muscles. Stroke from the chest to over the shoulder, the chest down to the belly, the shoulders down the front legs to the toes, the back of the ears down to the tail along the spine, beside the cheek bones, under the chin, over the muzzle, the back of the ears and the front of the chest.

These are all areas that have the potential to calm your pup and reduce mouthing as it creates a calming feeling. If you move slowly, your pup will settle down. If you move quickly, your pup will become aroused.

When you do this exercise, use words like SETTLE to cue it to calm down so that eventually it will learn to settle and allow for touching without mouthing at all.

And ensure you are in a calm state yourself when doing this handling exercise as your energy can influence your pup's behaviour.

If at any stage, you feel your pup is really biting more than mouthing or playing, please get in contact with me so we can assess the situation and resolve it as quickly as possible.

