

Puppy biting, nipping, and mouthing



Puppy biting is unfortunately a normal development phase in puppies and needs to be considered when deciding on whether a puppy or adult dog is right for your family. Children can find puppy mouthing and biting difficult to cope with as it is unpredictable and it hurts. This can lead to difficulty with establishing good child and dog relationships. Other children may seek this sensory feedback and put their hands etc. into the dog's mouth so again this can be difficult to manage.

Puppies will use their mouths to explore and learn about their environment. They learn how to use their teeth from a very young age when playing with littermates.

This behaviour towards people is not dominance based— we discuss this in detail in Workshop 2 when we look closer at family structure and the team leader role. It is your role to teach your puppy the appropriate behaviour, instead of mouthing, once they enter the home. This takes time and consistency in teaching your puppy when it is and isn't appropriate to use their teeth, as well as managing interactions with family members.

Alongside biting, nipping, and mouthing, the puppy may snarl, growl, and bark. These are all elements of normal canine communication but as a puppy they will not be refined in their communication techniques. You may also experience this during mouthing episodes.

Being over tired, over stimulated, or being anxious or frustrated can also be a cause of biting, nipping, and mouthing—often as the puppy isn't sure how to cope with the environment and hasn't been taught more appropriate behaviours to do instead. This may be more prevalent at certain times of day so often a pattern can be found in why this behaviour arises e.g. your puppy is due a nap but hasn't slept; the children have just come home from school and everything is noisy; or your puppy has had lots of new things to get used to and learn about and you see an increase in nipping and biting at home.

What to do if you have a problem with puppy biting

Check their environment:

Are there things in their environment that you need to gradually introduce your puppy to, like we talk about in the workshops, such as shouting and screaming? Do they have their safe space to retreat to?

If your puppy's biting and nipping becomes worse around unpredictable things happening in their environment, it is likely being brought on by anxiety. Until you can gradually introduce your puppy to these situations and triggers, encourage use of their safe space.

Make sure their safe space, e.g. their crate, is always accessible and contains everything they need, including their bed with comfy bedding, a water bowl, and safe, long-lasting chews. Remember you may have to positively encourage them in there to begin with (see 'Creating the safe space' handout for more information).



Do they have plenty of opportunities to chew?



Make sure there are plenty of suitable items of different materials around that the puppy is able to chew on;—swap them around regularly to keep them interesting. A portion of their meals can be soaked, then put in a KONG and frozen to give your puppy a safe long-lasting treat that will help fulfil their need to chew and use their mouth. Refer to our ‘Equipment list’ and ‘Feeding your dog’ handouts for more chew toy ideas.

Is biting happening around certain times of the day, or in certain situations?

If biting and nipping happens more often at certain times of the day, or in certain situations, try to pre-empt this and be ready to intervene. Have suitable toys such as a ragger/tug toy, Nylabones, and chews ready to direct them onto, so you are starting to teach them an alternative behaviour. If your dog is over stimulated—for example if the children have just arrived home from school; or if your dog could be over tired (if you know they normally need a nap around that time, or it’s been a busy day), try to anticipate the problem and settle them in their crate or safe space with a stuffed KONG at these times.

Are they biting clothes and toes

Puppies will often go for and hold onto to your trousers, dressing gown, jumper and toes. This is because they are exciting things that move, it gets a reaction out of you and usually results in a bit of a tug of war.

Again direct the puppy onto something more appropriate, such as a ragger toy. If they are doing this to children, if possible ask the child to act like a tree and stand perfectly still while you call your puppy away and direct them onto something else. If children want to feel in control, you can build in them pointing towards you when you call the puppy so they feel like they are helping.

Are they biting while playing?

Often playing rough games or games that cause high excitement lead to the puppy nipping as they become over stimulated. Keep these games to a minimum, especially between the puppy and children, concentrating instead on calmer activities, such as interactive toys and find the treat and toy games.

Don’t play using your arms or body as this encourages mouthing, nipping and biting; always use a toy. Be consistent with this so your puppy is not confused as to why sometimes they are allowed to bite hands and sometimes they are not.

If they bite by accident while playing, say ‘ouch’, stop the game and move away from the puppy— they will probably follow you. Once they are calm, direct them onto playing with a toy.

If at any point the puppy chooses to play with a toy and comes to you with it instead of mouthing or biting you, reward them by having a game with them. If they choose to go away and chew on a toy or a Nylabone etc. praise them verbally.

Are they getting enough sleep?

Dogs need 12-16 hours of sleep over a day, and puppies need 18-20. If they are not getting enough sleep this will impact on their behaviour and increase biting.

Are you feeding an appropriate diet?

Try to avoid foods with artificial additives, flavourings, and colourings, as these can lead to hyperactivity and other issues (see our 'Feeding your dog' handout for more info).

Puppy biting quick reference guide

Reasons for puppy biting	Dos of puppy biting	Don'ts of puppy biting
<p>Normal behaviour in puppy development.</p> <p>Settling in phase - puppies will show more undesirable behaviours while they are learning about you and their environment including behaviours like mouthing and jumping up.</p> <p>Over stimulation and over tiredness.</p> <p>Anxiety and frustration when trying to learn new things or understand changes in the home.</p> <p>Lack of consistency e.g. Sometimes they are allowed to play with your hands and put their mouth round them, sometimes they aren't.</p> <p>Something is missing in their environment e.g. Safe space and quiet time.</p> <p>Doing too much too soon with the puppy.</p>	<p>Check that they have everything in their environment that they need e.g. Safe space, range of chews, correct diet, and plenty of sleep.</p> <p>Redirect them onto something suitable to bite and chew.</p> <p>Have chews/toys/stuffed KONGs at the ready for bitey moments.</p> <p>Get children involved e.g. Standing still when the puppy is biting clothes etc.</p> <p>Team leader to take control in situations that will lead to biting and nipping and redirect children and puppy onto more suitable activities.</p> <p>Call/email/contact us via the forum for some more ideas.</p>	<p>Don't use anything aversive to stop your puppy from biting as it is a normal behaviour and this will be damaging to the relationship e.g. Don't shout at your puppy or drag them by their scruff.</p> <p>Don't shut your puppy away or in their crate for doing this; redirect them onto something suitable to chew and settle them with it in their crate or safe space with the door open.</p> <p>Don't attempt to win a tug of war with the puppy if they get hold of clothing; quietly stand very still, and when they let go redirect them onto something suitable.</p> <p>Don't play games with your hands, arms, or body—use a toy.</p>