

Puppy Raising

Mouthing

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Knowing your puppy

Mouthing is the term that we use to describe when a puppy takes hold of our skin and puts pressure on. Whilst it's a perfectly "normal" puppy behaviour (and a way that puppies explore the world around them) – it can be painful for us. It's important that we teach our puppies how to interact with people appropriately, without mouthing, so that this behaviour doesn't continue into adulthood as this could impact their ability to become a guide dog.

Puppies mouth for many different reasons, including:

- In play
- To gain attention
- To explore
- To communicate how they're feeling (including over-tired, over-excited, or overwhelmed)

They are also likely to mouth when they are teething to try and alleviate the pain they might be experiencing. When they're teething, make sure they have lots of different textures to safely chew on (hard, soft, cold, Kong ©, etc).

It's important for you to try and work out why your puppy is mouthing you so you can address it effectively.

- Is it happening at predictable times?
- Are there specific cues which seem to make your puppy mouth?
- Are their needs being met?
- What does biting get for your puppy? (i.e. a reaction from you for example).



Managing for success

Take time to establish a routine for your puppy, and make sure they're getting enough rest, sleep, exercise and mental stimulation. This should consist of both play times and quiet times where they have opportunities for both activity with you, activity alone, and rest. At quiet times, you want them to learn to entertain themselves without your attention, so provide a safe environment where they can do this without the risk of them being able to reach or chew items they shouldn't. Puppy pens, or baby gates are invaluable for helping set this kind of space up, protecting your furniture and your puppy. Please read the document [Preparing for your puppy within the Preparing for and early days of having a puppy course](#) and refer to the section Puppy-proofing your house.

If you know what causes your puppy to mouth, are you able to change something in the environment to reduce the likelihood of your puppy mouthing?

Some common examples of mouthing, and what to do, include:

- When your puppy is over-tired but isn't able to recognise this. Often, when this happens, they get the "zoomies" – they might play-bow, run around quickly, try and shred things, or try to grab at your hands, legs, or clothes. This might always happen at a specific time (often first thing in the morning, or in the evening), or maybe before or after certain events (for example, always after they have eaten). When your puppy does this, you might give them attention by laughing at them, or even asking them to calm down and be quiet.
- Try and have a consistent routine for your puppy, and make sure they are getting plenty of sleep. If you notice them starting to get over-excited and show any of the above behaviours, act calmly and make sure they have access to their sleeping area. You can encourage them to calm down by giving them a Kong © or chew.

- When you pick your puppy up or try and move your puppy physically from one place to another (for example, putting them in their crate at night, or if they get on the furniture and you're trying to move them off) they might mouth at your hands and arms.
- Block off places that you don't want your puppy to access and if they do access them try to avoid physically moving your puppy. Instead, when you need to move your puppy, use your voice or clap to get their attention. If this doesn't encourage them towards you, then lure them where you want them to go using a tasty food reward (think of it like a magnet on the end of your puppy's nose). Reward them for following you. If you have taught them a hand touch you could use this instead.
- If you're trying to put equipment on your puppy (for example, their collar or T-touch harness) and they mouth the equipment, or your hands.
- This could suggest they're not comfortable with having it on. Go back to the [Handling, Grooming and Equipment course](#) and build your puppy's confidence in the equipment again. If you need to get the equipment on in the short term, drop some food on the floor or use a lickimat to distract your puppy as you pop the equipment on and make sure you mention this to your Puppy Development Advisor..
- When you're playing with your puppy with toys, and they accidentally grab hold of your skin or clothes rather than the toy.
- Your puppy will be learning the ropes of what is okay to put in their mouth, and what isn't! If their teeth touch your skin, without saying anything to your puppy, drop the toy and make it go "dead" for a few seconds to end the game. When your puppy is a bit calmer, you can reactivate the game with the toy – ensuring that if they make contact with your skin again, then you drop the toy again. Longer toys can be better for interactive games with you as they allow



Your puppy will learn the ropes of what is okay to put in their mouth and what isn't!

you to keep your hands further away from your pup's mouth whilst they are still working out their coordination. Keep the toy low to the floor and encourage your pup to chase the toy rather than you. Please read the document [Your puppy's first week within the course Preparing for and early days of having a puppy](#) or more information.

- If your puppy meets someone new to them and they're trying to gain more information about that person, they might mouth them to try and get a better smell of them.
- Distract them. You might need to use an emergency lure to get them away or to wiggle a toy or to move yourself to get their attention. Then, manage the situation so that your puppy doesn't go back to mouthing the person – for example by having your puppy on lead and moving away from the person so that your puppy can't reach them, and then rewarding them for calm behaviours (sitting and watching the person whilst you chat, for example). Keep interactions with people brief so that your puppy doesn't get overwhelmed and start to mouth.



Teaching foundations

It's important to make sure you're managing your puppy's environment carefully to avoid them needing to mouth you. You'll also need to teach them how to interact with people calmly and what games they can play.

Rewarding your puppy for calm behaviour around people will aid this learning. When your puppy is nice and calm greeting people, or yourself, engage with them by stroking them calmly, or by giving them a few food rewards. Keep interactions brief and positive, and then if needed, use a Kong or chew to encourage longer lasting calm behaviours. Please read the document [Greeting people](#) for more information.

Teach them what games they can play and how. Keeping any games with your puppy brief and calm – watching their body language and looking out for any signs that they are getting more excited (tension in their body, upright ear and tail position, vocalisations such as barking). If you spot any of these signs, think about changing to a calmer game (finding some treats in a snuffle mat or trying out some different enrichment ideas – refer to enrichment handout). Playing with your puppy and then directing them into a calm activity is a great way to teach them how to relax after an exciting event. Please read the information on tug toy games within the course [Learning to Play](#) for more information.



Being a partnership

If your puppy does mouth you, it's important not to tell them off, as this could make them feel worried, scared, or frustrated, which might make them more likely to intensify their behaviour. As much as mouthing can sometimes hurt, and our natural reaction is to squeak or dance around, this is not going to help – in fact, it might make your puppy more excited as you turn into a giant squeaky toy! Instead, in the moment, stop or move yourself away from your puppy for a brief time. Then when you interact again, you can redirect them onto something more appropriate (a toy or chew) and try and encourage them to calm down.

Reflect on why you think your puppy mouthed you (Refer to the Knowing your puppy section), and if you have any concerns, or if the mouthing is getting more frequent, speak to your PDA.



Remember to never tell your puppy off for mouthing.



[Video: Managing mouthing.](#)