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How to Stop Play Mouthing and Biting

What is puppy biting and mouthing?

Puppies and dogs explore the world with their mouths. They also use their mouths to play with each other. Puppies naturally try to play with us with their mouths too. They also will sometimes mouth us when they are over excited or want to grab at a toy or treat. Mouthing is something we need to teach our dogs not to do.

The rule is: After a pup is 16 weeks old AND has learned to mouth gently (bite inhibition), no more teeth on people.

How do you stop mouthing and play biting?

1. You make sure your pup has learned to bite gently (see Good Dog Santa Cruz's handout on Play Biting and ask me how you do this).
2. Teach your puppy to chew on other things such as toys, stuffed Kongs, chew toys, chews such as bully sticks, bones (if OK with your vet), etc. Your puppy must not only have options for mouthing, but have learned to love those options.
3. Teach your pup to grab something legal to chew on when excited. Say, "Get your toy," or "Get your chew," and follow up with showing the pup the chew item.
4. Stop all hand wrestling games where your dog plays with you with his mouth—this needs to happen with everyone in the family.
5. Prevent your dog from mouthing in excitement (such as when you first come home) by giving your pup something to chew on or dropping treats on the floor while you greet.
6. Stop all mouthing in play and all bossy mouthing using time outs. Your pup can learn to stop mouthing completely with this technique.

What is a time-out?

A technique used to teach a dog to stop doing something we don't like, just like you would do with a child. The idea of the time-out, in essence, is the removal of fun. We do this by removing the dog from the situation or by restricting his access to an object, person, or dog.

What can a time-out look like?

- Stop the play action or leave the room
- Walk your dog away from an object, person, or dog
- Put your dog in his crate (if he is crate trained), behind a baby gate, or behind a closed door
- Put your dog on a leash

Examples of what to use time-outs for.

Mouthing and jumping during playtime with you

Demand barking

Inappropriate dog-dog play (nipping, rough wrestling, or incessant barking)

How to use a time-out.

Pick a behavior. Decide the specific behavior that triggers a time-out. In this case, mouthing you.

Find the trigger. Observe your dog to figure out which behavior tends to come just before the mouthing. For example, your dog may start to get very excited right before mouthing. This will be your signal to give your dog his warning cue.

Step 1. Give your warning cue. Anytime you see the signal behavior, give your warning cue. For example, “Easy!” If your dog responds to the cue and dials down the behavior, praise him and allow play to continue.

Step 2. Signal the time-out. If your dog disregards the warning cue and engages in the target behavior—in this case mouthing or biting—give him the time-out signal (like “Oops!” or “Too bad”).

Step 3. Give the time-out. Time your dog out by stopping the play immediately—drop the toy and turn away or get up and walk out of the room (you can close a door if your pup is following and nipping). You can also put him on a leash and remove him from the room or the play area. Consistency is key. For time-outs to work they must be given every time your dog engages in the target behavior—at the very second he begins.

Step 4. Back to play. Release your dog after 10 to 30 seconds for 16 to 24 week old pups and up to 1 to 2 minutes for older pups to try again.

Repeat if needed! Repetition is what will help your pup learn that it is the mouthing that stops the play. If after 4 or 5 times, your pup continues to mouth, stop the play altogether. Put your pup in his confinement area with something good to chew.