

# Puppy chewing and mouthing



When your puppy first arrives home, it will most likely still have its puppy teeth. These teeth are like sharp little needles, and puppies use them on everything!

Puppies begin to lose their puppy teeth at around four months of age, starting with the middle two incisors. The normal teething process takes place over the next few months, with their puppy teeth gradually replaced by larger (and less sharp) adult teeth.

Like young children who are teething, this process can be painful at times. Some puppies may have times where they do not like being handled around the mouth or may have days when they are a bit reluctant to eat hard foods.

## Chewing and mouthing is normal

Mouthing and chewing on things (including their littermates) is perfectly normal and is a necessary learning process for puppies. It is through feedback about their biting that puppies learn '**bite inhibition**'. Bite inhibition involves learning how to control their jaws and the strength of their bite in different situations.

Once they have moved away from their littermates, puppies tend to redirect this mouthing and biting on whatever is available to them in their new home – this includes people, other pets, toys and chew items. Some puppies are far more 'mouthy' than others are so you need to be prepared for this and have strategies to manage it.

It is interesting to note that puppies who do not mouth and bite things at this age and therefore don't get any feedback are less likely to learn the fine motor control that results from this period of learning. As a consequence, they are actually more likely to cause damage with their mouth as an adult should they choose to bite something.



## Puppies need to chew and gnaw

Puppies NEED to chew. It aids with teething, and it is also thought to be a 'de-stressing' activity. Chewing on things takes up quite a bit of a normal puppy's day, so providing safe and appropriate items to chew on is essential.

Chew items should vary – some hard, some soft, some big, some small. You also need to put away items that are not suitable chew toys as puppies cannot tell the difference between a dog toy and the remote control for your TV.

If they are a bit reluctant to interact, puppies can be encouraged to chew things by smearing the item with something yummy – a bit of peanut butter, some wet food, or even Vegemite, depending on what your puppy likes.

Small food treats or even their meal ration can be stuffed inside certain types of chew toys (such as a Kong™) requiring the puppy to really engage with the toy to get to the food.

You can speak to your vet about which of the edible food chews might be suitable for your puppy, and how they might be incorporated into your pup's daily diet. Remember raw meaty bones and some chew treats can be very fatty or high calorie and may upset your puppy's tummy if they have too much.

Some things marketed as chews for adult dogs can be dangerous for puppies, either due to their size or their composition.

## Coaching appropriate behaviour

Next, you need to set some boundaries in regards to mouthing and biting directed at humans. We want the puppy to have an opportunity to learn that humans are very fragile, and biting them is not a desired behaviour.

The best way to do this is to provide consistent 'feedback' and overtime to discourage this behaviour – both by not reinforcing it (with continued play) and by redirecting the puppy onto a more appropriate item.

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Generally, puppies will mouth and bite during play sessions. Everyone in the household must understand that play sessions should not be allowed to get out of hand. If the puppy starts to mouth and bite, the first strategy is to redirect the behaviour onto a toy (that means you need a suitable toy handy if you are going to play).

If the mouthing escalates, or a nip is particularly hard, then the play session stops immediately – get up, walk away, or give the puppy a ‘time out’ in its quiet area. The time out does not have to be long – it just sends the puppy a message that mouthing and biting directed at humans will cause the fun to stop.

If your children are the targets of the mouthing behaviour, you will need to closely supervise their interactions and step in if required. Unfortunately, children (and especially teenagers) often encourage and reinforce the mouthing and biting by playing games that involve a lot of hands and mouths – roughing the pup up and getting it excited.

Mouthing and chewing is a behaviour that will most likely be covered during your puppy class. Your puppy class trainer may also give you some other strategies to try if your puppy is particularly persistent, and they can help coach you in person.

## **Mouthing has nothing to do with ‘dominance’**

There is a lot of outdated and misinformed dog training information out in the public domain. Any training information that uses ‘dominance’ as an explanation for puppy mouthing shows absolutely no understanding of behavioural science or the learning processes in puppies and should be avoided.

Trainers who still use ‘dominance theory’ to explain dog behaviour and training problems are often those trainers who rely heavily on positive punishment methods.

It is important that you never smack or bite your puppy (it sounds crazy but people try it) for mouthing as this can cause the puppy to become fearful of people, and does little to address a perfectly normal behaviour.

Steer well clear of trainers or websites that talk about physical punishment (hitting, slapping, biting or pinning a puppy down on its back) as a ‘training strategy’ as they are obviously not up to date with their knowledge of dog behaviour or learning theory.

## **Teaching an ‘object exchange’**

There is nothing worse than seeing your puppy shoot down the corridor or into the yard with your mobile phone, the remote control, or an item of clothing that you have accidentally left within reach. Similarly, when you are out on your walk and your puppy finds something interesting and picks it up, and you are not sure what it is and whether it might be dangerous. Puppies tend to put everything in their mouth, and of course, if the item seems highly prized, and a chase game ensues, they can be very evasive.

A great preventative strategy is to teach your puppy an ‘**object exchange**’ very early on. This involves ‘trading’ an object in their mouth for something ‘better’. Your puppy is given a toy, and once they are playing with it, you offer them a highly prized treat, or a higher-ranking toy, in ‘exchange’ for the original item. This way, the puppy learns that when you ask them to give up the item they have in their mouth, it is likely to be rewarded with something better or more valued than what they had.

The object exchange behaviour can be paired with a verbal cue such as ‘Give’ or ‘Ta’. With lots of repetitions, the puppy learns that relinquishing items in their mouth has a favourable outcome, rather than just having things taken from them. This reduces the risk of them trying to prevent you having the item – in fact; some dogs learn the exchange so well they will start bringing you items in the hope of starting a game or earning a treat!

A good puppy class instructor will talk about object exchanges and how to go about teaching the behaviour. They can demonstrate the early steps and set you on the right path.

Puppy class curriculum should also teach general handling and how to go about teaching your pup to allow you to examine its mouth and teeth should the need arise.