



Adult Dogs Who Mouth & Nip

Puppies spend a lot of time playing, chewing and investigating objects — including people! Adult dogs who mouth people probably never learned not to mouth as puppies. It's likely that they weren't taught by their human parents during puppyhood how to be gentle or to chew toys instead. So they continue to mouth, even though they're now mature.

Being mouthed by an adult dog is more painful than being mouthed by a puppy. And adult mouthing is often more difficult to suppress because adults aren't as sensitive to our reactions as puppies are, and they may be harder to control physically because of their size.

How to Stop Your Dog's Mouthing

Your dog must learn to go out of his way to avoid putting his teeth on human skin or clothing. Here's how to teach him:

1. Whenever your dog's teeth touch your skin — no matter where on your body and regardless of whether it actually hurts — immediately yell "Ouch!" as if you're hurt. Aim for a surprised tone rather than an angry one. Then quickly turn your back to your dog. Ignore him completely for a 15-second timeout, or if he starts mouthing or nipping again, get up and move away or out of the room for 10 seconds.
2. After the timeout, turn back toward your dog and resume whatever you were doing, whether greeting or playing together with a toy.
3. If your dog bites you again, yell "Ouch!" again. Repeat these steps *consistently* each time you feel your dog's teeth on your skin or clothing.
4. If his bites don't decrease after 3 timeouts, end play or interaction altogether after your third "Ouch!" Leave the room or put your dog in a crate, outside or in another room.

✓ Key Tips

- Be sure that the room is "dog-proofed" before you leave your dog alone in it. Don't leave him with things that he can destroy or have fun with. Alternatively, you can keep a leash attached to your dog during training and let it drag on the floor. Then, instead of leaving the room when your dog mouths you, take hold of his leash, lead him to a quiet area, tether him and turn your back to him for the brief timeout. Then untie him and resume whatever you were doing.
- If 15-second timeouts don't reduce your dog's mouthing after a couple of sessions, try longer timeouts, like 30 to 60 seconds.
- Substitute a toy or chew bone when your dog tries to gnaw on fingers or toes.
- Dogs often mouth people's hands when stroked, patted and scratched. If your dog gets riled up when you pet him, distract him with small treats given from your other hand or a toy. This helps your dog get used to being touched without mouthing you.
- Encourage noncontact forms of play, such as fetch and tug-of-war, rather than wrestling and rough play with your hands. Ask us for our handout on tug guidelines to be sure the game is both fun and educational for your dog. Once your dog can play tug safely, keep tug toys in your pocket or have them nearby. If he starts to mouth you, you can quickly redirect him to the tug toy. Ideally, he'll start to anticipate and look for a toy whenever he feels like mouthing.

- If your dog bites at your feet and ankles, carry his favorite tug toy in your pocket. Whenever he ambushes you, stop moving your feet and wait for him to stop biting. The second he stops, praise him and whip out the tug toy, waving it enticingly to encourage play. When your dog grabs the toy, start moving again. Repeat these steps until your dog gets used to seeing you move around without going after your feet or ankles.
- If your dog mouths and bites at greetings, like when you arrive home after an absence, keep a favorite toy or two right by the front door. When you arrive, grab the toy and hold it behind your back. Then ask for a sit. The moment she sits, reward her by tossing the toy. Turning the greeting into play helps positively redirect all her excitement toward the toy rather than on mouthing and jumping on you.
- Provide plenty of interesting and new toys so that your dog will play with them instead of gnawing on you or your clothing.
- Provide lots of opportunities for your dog to play with friendly adult dogs. He can expend a lot of energy playing with dogs and have less need to play roughly with you.
- If timeouts aren't effective, consider using a taste deterrent, such as Grannick's Bitter Apple. Spray areas of your body and clothing that your dog likes to mouth *before you start interacting with him*. If he mouths you or your clothing, stop moving and wait for him to react to the bad taste of the deterrent. Praise him lavishly when he lets go of you. Apply the bad taste to your body and clothes for at least two weeks. After two weeks of being punished by the bitter taste every time he mouths you, your dog will likely learn to inhibit his mouthy behavior.

General Precautions

- Don't encourage your dog to bite your hands by waving your hands in your dog's face or slapping the sides of his face to entice him to play.
- Don't discourage play with you altogether. Play is fun, good exercise, and builds a strong bond between you and your dog. Just stick to noncontact games like tug and fetch.
- Slapping or hitting dogs for mouthing can cause them to bite harder or play more aggressively. Being physically hard or forceful with dogs often teaches them to become hard right back at us. Physical punishment can also make your dog afraid of you or your hands and can even cause aggression. Avoid scruff shaking, hitting your dog's nose, sticking your fingers down his throat, and all other punishments.