STOPPING PUPPY PLAY BITING
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Mouthing is an instinctual behavior among canines, and it is normal, natural, and a part of raising a puppy. That doesn’t make it less painful for the humans who must deal with it, as the puppies’ “milk teeth” are incredibly sharp and pups tend to prefer hands and other exposed skin as their targets, even when toys are available. There is exploratory mouthing, teething mouthing, and protest mouthing.

**Exploratory mouthing** is the most common, as pups don’t have hands to grab objects as they learn about the world. They will put pretty much anything in their mouths, and have no concept of what might be dangerous, or what we value and do not want to see destroyed.

**Teething** starts at about 12 weeks of age and continues until the adult teeth are fully seated at 7 months. Teething mouthing is often a bit more forceful than exploratory mouthing, because the puppy is uncomfortable.

**Protest mouthing** is when the pup is being handled in a way he does not appreciate—either he is being made to do something he doesn’t want to do, or he is overtired from hands-on and needs a break (this is way more common than people realize; make sure your 8-12-week-old pup gets at least 20 hours of sleep per day).

Poor breeding practices, genetics, whether the pup had littermates and/or an effective dog “mom,” when he was weaned, a lack of (or incorrect) human handling from 3 weeks to 8 weeks—all of these can play a part in how much and how hard a puppy mouths. Unfortunately, none of these things can be changed at this point, but they can offer a window of insight for the future for puppy acquisition.

For the first 8 weeks of their lives, puppies (if raised in optimum conditions) receive discipline from the mother dog whenever play with littermates gets too rough. After the pups leave the mother, it is the humans’ job to calmly but firmly discipline young puppies when they play too roughly, or exhibit any other unwanted behaviors. The bottom line in training dogs is to **REWARD** behaviors you want (with petting, verbal praise and yummy bits of food); **PREVENT, DISCOURAGE, or STOP** (by startling, not scaring, the young pup, usually with noise) behaviors you do not want, and then **REDIRECT** the misbehaving pooch to the **PROPER** behavior (chewing his
toy instead of your hand; urinating OUTSIDE; sitting quietly; etc). Simply correcting him does no good because it doesn’t tell him what you want. Show him, and praise when he does it! Never strike the pup with your hand or any other object; use a shake can (or loud clapping) to startle him so you can redirect.

Make a shake can by washing out a soda can. Fill it with 5 pennies and tape over the hole. Try to use it out of sight of the pup (behind your back, for instance), so that he doesn’t associate the noise with you. You simply want his ERRANT behavior to garner a loud noise, and then you will magically be there to redirect him.

When his mouth closes on your hand, let out a loud OUCH or yelp (like a puppy would if his litter mate was biting him) to startle him. Be loud and dramatic, and give him a stern look right in the eyes. Do not remove your hand; wait for him to take his mouth off of it, then praise warmly. Be ready with a toy he really likes* and put that in his mouth as you are praising him, and praise him further if he redirects his chewing to it. Your impulse will be to yank your hand away, but puppies love to chase moving objects, so you risk turning mouthing into a fun game if you yank your hand away. Stay calm and still, startle him, and then redirect.

NOTE: the “ouch” method works for some pups, but for others, it makes them worse. If this happens, stop and try something different. In fact, if ANY of what’s on this handout makes the problem worse, stop!

(Another way to get his attention if the yelp doesn’t work is to shake the shake can behind your back, and then put the toy in his mouth when, startled, he lets go of your hand.)

Do not touch him anywhere with your hands as he is biting (pushing him off, etc) as this will serve to reward the behavior. Every time you touch the dog, you are rewarding the behavior he is exhibiting at that moment. Your goal is to make him stop his behavior and then praise and divert him to something acceptable to chew. If your pup knows “sit,” ask him to sit; it will be something else you can reward him for.

If the biting occurs during play, end the play session immediately (if you are in a “safe area,” get up and leave him there alone; if not, physically take him and GENTLY put him in his crate or the “safe area”). If this calms him, fine, you can try to return to play after a few minutes. If it DOESN'T calm him, play session is over, and he stays in the crate for a while. Message: If you can't play nice, I will not play with you. Since he wants to be with you, this is typically effective.
Short periods of isolation work wonders as punishment, especially isolation that takes place where he can see you but cannot interact with you. Do not get angry with him; be matter-of-fact and direct, and when the timeout is over, all is forgiven. The quicker you remove your attention after the “infraction,” the quicker he will learn. NOTE: the isolation MUST be immediate!

You may find that tethering him to a large piece of furniture or placing the loop of a flat leash over the door knob on the reverse side of a door, then bringing the leash on your side and shutting the door will help to “isolate” him faster and more effectively than putting him in a crate. Play with him within the range of his tether as long as he does not try to mouth you. When he starts to mouth, immediately get up and move quickly just far enough away so that you are out of his reach. You must do this AS SOON AS his mouth closes on your hand. Say nothing, just scoot away or walk away, your back to him, and stand or sit down just outside of the leash’s reach. Ignore him for several minutes, and try again. He will soon learn that putting his mouth on you makes you GO AWAY. This is a great way to punish, because it can be done without physical force, and no lasting harm to Fido. Most dogs hate for their people to go away, and they quickly learn that it is THEIR behavior causing it to occur. Set up this scenario several times when you have time so Fido can practice learning to let go at the OUCH instead, and eventually to stop putting his mouth on you altogether.

This takes time and patience to teach, and there is no need to be forceful, “make him submit,” or frighten him—this will backfire later. Be calm and consistent, and make sure to reward the right behaviors over and over.

**Note to parents:**

These training tips work best when used by older children or adults. Younger children may not understand the “don’t yank your hand away” rule, and may then get the pup too riled up to behave properly. Therefore, you must train your pup not to mouth by **setting up sessions where the pup mouths you**, and gets the training outlined above. As he builds good habits, involve your kids in the supervised training sessions gradually. He can generalize good habits to your kids, but it is up to you to create those habits. Don’t wait for mouthing to happen to children--train early and prevent it! Never leave children unattended with pets for any reason, and remind your kids to play gently and calmly with animals.

* **VALUE SESSIONS:** You may have to **make a toy valuable** before it will work effectively as a replacement for your hand. Your body parts, shoes, clothes, etc. are MUCH more fun to chew than some boring old toy out of a
package. To make that toy valuable, play with the item with your pet for a few moments (fetch or drag-chase-pounce), then, **while the animal is still interested**, put the toy away while the pet watches. Go do something else, with or without the pet. Come back to the toy after a while, and repeat. Do this several times per day, ALWAYS removing the item between sessions, and always ending the game on YOUR terms (you want to end it while the pet is still excited about it). Do not allow the animal unlimited access to the item, ever. Gradually, you can intersperse periods of combined play (you, the pet, and the toy) with periods where you simply give the pet the toy, and he plays with it. This gives you some time to yourself. Be careful, though, as some pets, when left alone with a favorite toy, tear it to shreds. Keep sessions with the toy short and fun, and every time you pull it out, your pet will enjoy it more. This is also a good way to get an important message across to your pet: the humans control all the good things in your life...and you may have to “work” a little to get them.

**HINT:** To help make a soft (fleecy or fabric) toy more enticing, sleep with the item for a night or two before doing the above. It will smell like you, which will help with its value. To make a hard or rubber toy more exciting, rub a piece of hotdog or some other tasty meat on it before presenting it for the first few “value sessions.” Praise your pet for mouthing, licking, or chewing the toy.

Don’t forget to make sure your dog has the proper chewing items available, in addition to toys. Please see our handout about chew toys.

**ADDITIONAL “WHEN ALL ELSE FAILS” NOTE:**

If your pup or dog continues to mouth despite SEVERAL ATTEMPTS at all of these suggestions, purchase a canister of breath spray (Binaca® is one brand name; a knockoff works just as well). Palm it so that your dog cannot see it, and set him up in a play session (see instructions above) so that he will mouth you. As soon as he goes to put his mouth on your hand, give one quick squirt into his MOUTH (not eyes) to interrupt the behavior, then REDIRECT him to a toy or bone, and praise, pet him calmly, praise.

It is important that he be surprised by this squirt, and that he find it unpleasant. You MUST be ready to redirect him to a better item to chew. Therefore, do not use this method unless you have an item close by. Always lay on the calm praise when he chooses not to mouth you.

You can also use Bitter Apple® spray for this if you like. It is commonly available at pet supply stores. However, it is not as easy to “palm” out of sight of the dog. You don’t want the dog to stop biting because he sees the bottle.
FINAL NOTE:

SOME puppies are more committed to using teeth, especially retrievers. Though most of the time it is normal, some pups may not have had the early lessons from Mom and littermates to help them, and they can be more forceful or reactionary.

True aggression in a young puppy is abnormal, but it does occur. **Not sure if what you are seeing and dealing with is normal, or aggression?** You may need hands-on help.

If your pup still does not improve with all these attempts, or meets the criteria for “worrisome” in the above link, please email me. I can be reached at training@atlantahumane.org.