

Puppy Training: Stopping Nipping and Mouthing

Mouthing and nipping are two different issues. *Mouthing* is a lesser infraction; it's more of a communication skill to get you to do a particular thing. Less pressure, less annoying, but still not particularly charming. *Nipping* is a puppy thing; it's interactive and playful. If you have an older puppy who still nips, you may be dealing with aggression. Nipping puppies are bossy and manipulative and need a firmer regimen.

Mouthing is an attention-getting behavior. If your dog uses it to communicate a need to go out, respond. If, on the other hand, your dog mouths you for a pat, ignore it. Pretend she isn't there. If she becomes too annoying, get Binaca Mouth Spray and spritz her discreetly in front of her nose, hiding the Binaca in your hand and avoiding all eye contact, comments, or pushing.

Nipping is different from mouthing (nipping with sharp little needle teeth can hurt!), and it's another one of those puppy things that you need to refocus. Consider this: When your puppy still hung out with her littermates, she nipped during play and to determine her rank. She also soft-mouthed her mother affectionately. When you bring your puppy home, this behavior continues.

What your puppy wants to know is who's a puppy and who's not. The answer determines the type of mouthing or nipping: soft or playful. Usually, everyone gets categorized as a puppy. Why? Well, for starters, most people pull their hands away when nipped. To a human, drawing back is self-defense; to a pup, however, it's an invitation to play. Even if you were to correct your young puppy, she wouldn't understand (it's like correcting a one-year-old baby for pulling your hair). So what should you do? Your approach depends on your puppy's age.

Pups younger than 16 weeks

Young puppies mouth a lot. They mouth when playing; they also mouth to communicate their needs. If your puppy starts mouthing, ask yourself these questions: Is she hungry or thirsty? Does she need to eliminate? Is she sleepy? Does she need to play? Remember, puppies nip when they feel needy (just like a baby cries). If your puppy won't let up, ask yourself if she wants something, like an outing, exercise, or a drink.

The following things can help you control mouthing and nipping:

- If your puppy doesn't need anything and she still won't quit, crate or isolate her with a favorite bone. Do not scold your puppy as you isolate her.
- Whenever your puppy licks you, say "Kisses" and praise her warmly. Encourage licking by slathering your hands with a frozen stick of butter. Yummm.

- Withhold your attention when your puppy nips softly. Keep your hand still; withdrawing your hand is an invitation to play and nip harder.
- If your puppy starts biting down hard, turn quickly, say "Ep, Ep!" and glare into her eyes for two seconds; then go back to your normal routine. If she persists, try spritzing yourself with Bitter Apple or affix a leash onto your puppy so that you can tug the lead sharply to the side. If necessary, place her in a quiet area to cool off.

Pups over 16 weeks

If you have a Peter Pan pup, one who isn't growing up, you need to start curbing it now. Although nipping will continue (for a few weeks yet), you need to make clear that it's unacceptable. Following are a few tips to help you:

- Stop all challenge games (wrestling, tug-of-war, chasing your dog around, and teasing). When you engage in these types of activities, you're sending the wrong message. These games teach dogs to clamp down hard on any object — a leash, the laundry, your shirt, or even your skin — and challenge.
- Discourage all nipping, whether it's a bite on your arm or a nibble on your finger. Teeth do not belong on human skin, period.
- Purchase a few weapons to use in defense, such as Binaca Mouth Spray, Bitter Apple spray, or a long-distance squirt gun.

Never stare at your pup while you spritz or spray her; doing so turns an unpleasant result into a confrontational interaction.

- Leave a leash on your puppy so you have something to direct her with and can avoid physical confrontation.
- If your puppy begins to mouth, turn to her, use a lead or collar to snap her head from your body, or spritz the region she's nipping with a spray. Do not glare at her or she'll perceive your actions as confrontational play.
- If she continues to nip, ask yourself if you look convincing, if you're snapping or pulling (pulling encourages play), or if your dog is taking you seriously. You may need more training before you earn her respect.

Pups with kids

Kids act a lot like puppies. They're always on the floor and into everything. If you have children, teach your puppy not to mouth them from the start. Here's how.

- Leave your puppy on a 4-foot-long nylon leash whenever she's with your children. If she starts playing too rough, pick up the leash, snap back, and say "Ep, Ep."
- If you're still having trouble, buy a long-distance squirt gun or plant mister and fill it with water and vinegar, and spray your dog discreetly when she starts getting riled up.
- If all else fails, give the puppy a time-out attached to you, stationed, or crated. Help the kids see that their restlessness leads to your withdrawing the puppy.

When things get out of hand, don't yell at the kids. Yelling sounds like barking to your dog and ups the fun ante. Calmly station, crate, or isolate your puppy until she mellows.

When grabbing and chasing are involved

Puppies, being puppies, are bound to chase and grab at things. If the thing is a ball or squeak toy, there's no problem. But if it's the children or your clothing, well, that's a problem. Your next goal is to teach the puppy what's acceptable to grab and pull at and what's off limits.

The bathrobe assault

If your puppy's a clothing grabber, dilute some Bitter Apple spray in a plant mister and carry it with you when you suspect the assault. Without looking at or responding to your pup, spray your dog discreetly and continue walking.

If this problem persists, get help now. It can develop into post-puberty aggression. No joke.

The child chaser

Kids running around the yard or house are a big temptation. If you were a puppy, you'd be jumping and nipping, too. Because you can't teach kids to stop being kids, you need to help your puppy control her impulses.

- 1. Put your pup on the leash and ask the kids to race around in front of you.**
- 2. Anytime your puppy looks tempted to lunge, snap back and say "Shhh."**
- 3. Repeat as often as necessary to gain control.**

Once you've tamed your dog inside, repeat the routine outside, first with a leash and then with a longer chain.