

ADDRESSING MOUTHY BEHAVIOR IN ADULT DOGS

WHY IS MY DOG A “SHARK”?

Just as we humans rely a great deal on our hands as we carry out our daily activities, dogs use their mouths a lot to explore the world and keep themselves occupied. Although the most intense chewing and biting happens during puppyhood, adult dogs need to exercise their jaws regularly too. It's important to provide plenty of “legal” chewing outlets for your dog, like hard rubber toys, natural marrow bones, rawhide and/or Nylabones.

Dogs also use their mouths quite a bit during their interactions with each other. Normal dog play involves a lot of *mouthing*, or inhibited “play-biting.” If your dog likes other dogs, letting him romp off-leash with buddies can provide opportunities for him to satisfy his natural instincts to roughhouse during play. He and his canine companions will enjoy chasing each other around, wrestling and gnawing on each other's faces, necks and legs. YOU, on the other hand, might not appreciate that kind of treatment, so when your dog tries to play with you like he plays with members of his own species, problems can arise....

HOW SHOULD I RESPOND WHEN MY DOG MOUTHS ON ME?

If your dog bites playfully on you or your clothing when you interact with him, keep in mind that he's not trying to hurt you. He's just treating you like one of his best friends—one of his best *canine* friends. Remember, your dog has hard-wired desires to use his mouth during play. He won't know how to interact with you in acceptable, teeth-free ways until you teach him.

In order to encourage your dog to avoid mouthy behavior during playtime or petting, you'll need to make a new rule: If he puts his mouth on you or your clothes—even for just a second—all fun stuff stops. The instant you feel teeth, yelp loudly, like a hurt puppy, or say “Ouch!” in a high-pitched voice. Then immediately give your dog a short “time-out” for 1 to 5 minutes, either by ignoring him completely, leaving the room yourself or taking your dog to a designated time-out area. You don't have to act stern or angry—just be very consistent. If you repeat this exercise, your dog will learn that putting his teeth on human skin or clothing always results in the *opposite* of what he wants: the end of play and social interaction.

ADDITIONAL TIPS

- Use toys when playing with your dog. If your dog gets hooked on games that involve putting toys in his mouth, he's much less likely to develop unwanted habits, like putting *other* things in his mouth (YOU, for instance). Train your dog to play fetch and tug—which are great energy burners and teach acceptable, fun ways for your dog to play politely with you. (Note: If you teach your dog how to play tug, just be sure you make some rules. He shouldn't grab the toy until you give him permission, he should drop the toy when you ask him to do so, and he should learn that the game always ends if he “misses” and accidentally puts his mouth on you or your clothing.)
- If your dog gets overly excited when interacting with you, be sure to avoid worsening the problem by getting excited yourself. Yelling and pushing your dog away from you will probably *increase* his excitement level. Instead, think ZEN. If you behave very calmly, it's likely that your dog will calm down too.
- Avoid accidentally encouraging mouthy behavior by roughhousing and wrestling with your dog. Also avoid teasing your dog (or letting others do so) by waving your hands around his head and face.

- Try spraying Grannick's Bitter Apple, a bad-tasting product intended to discourage chewing, on your hands or clothes. If your dog discovers that you suddenly taste horrible, he may never put his mouth on you again!
- If your dog exhibits a lot of mouthy, out-of-control behavior, he may need more exercise in general. Try taking him on more frequent or longer walks, going to dog parks (if he likes other dogs) or enrolling him in an agility or flyball class.
- Your dog may need to learn some impulse control skills, so consider taking an obedience class. Find one, like our Canine Manners Class, that will help you train your dog using modern methods based on positive reinforcement.
- Don't get mad at your dog if he tries to mouth on you. He's only doing what comes naturally to him. Just follow the directions above to reduce mouthing. If you're consistent, your dog will learn how to play and interact in ways that make BOTH of you happy.

RESOURCES & RECOMMENDED READING

If you'd like to find out more about agility, flyball or obedience classes—or if you need additional advice about your dog's behavior, please call our **Behavior Helpline: 804-643-SPCA**. We'd be happy to assist you.