

# PUPPY MOUTHING AND PLAY BITING

## WHY IS MY PUPPY 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, occupy themselves and interact with each other. Their ancestors relied upon the use of their jaws to hunt and consume prey, as well as to resolve conflict over scarce resources. Because canine mouths are equipped with sharp teeth and powerful muscles, it’s very important for dogs to exercise their jaws by regularly chewing on things *and* learn how to control jaw pressure in order to avoid seriously injuring each other during play or disputes over desirable stuff.

Although dogs need to satisfy their need to chew throughout their adult lives, the most intense chewing and biting happens during puppyhood. The discomfort of teething causes some of this behavior, but puppies also frequently “mouth” on each other during play because this activity helps them learn how to be gentle with their sharp puppy teeth. If a puppy mouths too hard on one of her pals, he’ll probably yelp and quit playing with her for a while—which is a valuable lesson. The message: If you bite me too hard and it hurts, I’m outta here! This is how puppies develop “bite inhibition,” the ability to inhibit the amount of pressure they exert when using their mouths on each other—and on us.

## HOW SHOULD I RESPOND WHEN MY PUPPY MOUTHS ON ME?

If your puppy is 18 weeks or younger, it’s actually a good idea to let her mouth on you during play, so you can help her learn how to be gentle. Let your young puppy chew on your hands as long as the “bites” are relatively soft, but when you notice harder chomps, yelp like a hurt puppy or say “Ouch!” in a high-pitched voice. Then immediately stop play and leave your puppy alone for 1 to 3 minutes. After the short “time-out,” you can resume play. If you repeat this exercise, your puppy will learn that mouthing on you too hard results in the end of all fun and interaction for a while. Later, after your puppy has learned to be gentler with her mouth, you can yelp and stop play EVERY time she puts her teeth on your skin.

## OTHER IMPORTANT TIPS

- DO provide a wide variety of “legal” chew toys and treats for your puppy. Redirect her attention to these if she attempts to gnaw on inappropriate items (like your clothes or your stuff).
- DO use toys when playing with your puppy. If the two of you frequently interact with your puppy’s toys, she’s much less likely to develop a habit of tugging on clothes or chewing on human hands instead.
- DO provide opportunities for your puppy to play with other healthy, vaccinated puppies and adult dogs.
- DON’T yell at your puppy for trying to mouth on you during play. She’s only doing what’s natural for puppies to do. If you follow the directions above when she mouths on you and make sure she has her own toys to chew, you’ll both be very happy.

## RESOURCES & RECOMMENDED READING

We highly recommend reading *Before You Get Your Puppy* and *After You Get Your Puppy* by veterinary behaviorist Dr. Ian Dunbar. You can find both in our gift shop. We also suggest enrolling in a good puppy class, as soon as your vet says it’s safe for your puppy to do so. If you need help finding a class or would like additional advice about your puppy’s behavior, please call our **Behavior Helpline: 804-643-SPCA**.