

Puppy Training Basics: Controlling Nipping

Teaching your puppy not to nip or mouth your hands or clothing can be a challenge, particularly if you've never had a puppy before and aren't prepared for just how boisterous your new pet can be during play time.

A Natural Behavior

Puppies use their mouths when they play and as a way of greeting other dogs in their pack. Since your puppy isn't out roaming the world with a group of dogs, you and your family become its pack. Mouthing is a natural way to greet a fellow pack member as far as your puppy is concerned.

Nipping or mouthing is also more common when puppies are teething. While this behavior is usually playful, a puppy's teeth can rip clothing and scratch or cut your skin. The behavior can become potentially dangerous if your puppy is permitted to continue it when it is fully grown.

Making Rules

Teaching your dog what is appropriate behavior in your home is the key to reducing mouthing, according to Deb McCrossen, an instructor for the Women's Humane Society's obedience training classes.

"Dogs need to understand the pecking order and rules in your house," she said. "When your dog understands that you are in charge, he'll wait for your signal to play." Obedience training classes can help your puppy learn the rules for behavior in your home and establish your position as the top dog, or alpha personality, in your family.

Because mouthing is a natural part of a puppy's development, Deb doesn't believe that it can be stopped entirely. The key to reducing the behavior is redirecting the puppy's attention. She recommends keeping plenty of toys around and offering a toy to the puppy every time it approaches you.

"Dogs wrestle and use their mouths with each other," she said. "That's why it's so vital in the early stages that you teach them that the toy is acceptable. I'm not."

Petting puppies calmly and avoiding petting them around the mouth can also help them from getting too excited. It is important that everyone in the family interact calmly with your puppy and that young children never be left alone with the puppy.

Just Say "Ouch"

The "ouch" technique is often recommended as a way to stop puppies from nipping or mouthing. When the puppy begins to nip or mouth, you say "ouch" loudly and walk away from the puppy. Saying "ouch" startles the puppy and walking away reinforces the idea that the puppy won't get attention from you if it nips or mouths.

Deb says that this approach can be helpful in many cases, but will be less successful if the puppy is nipping to get your attention. "If a puppy is not getting enough attention or exercise, it may learn to use mouthing to get attention. The more interaction with you, the more the dog gets payback," she said.

She doesn't recommend such practices as holding a nipping puppy's mouth closed or using a choke collar to stop mouthing. "If you hold the puppy's mouth closed, it may think you like to play harder and this may encourage more mouthing."

Choke collars are particularly dangerous because they can collapse a puppy's trachea, according to Deb, and use of these collars is an aggressive, rather than positive, way to train.



The Terrible Twos

She compares the mouthing phase to the terrible twos in children. "Puppies are testing the waters. They need to understand their place in your home," she said.

Just as the terrible twos eventually end, so will the mouthing phase for most dogs, particularly those that have been consistently trained and have learned what kind of behavior is expected in your home.