

Mouthiness

Mouthiness is when a dog places an open jaw on parts of a human's body for different reasons. It is not to be confused with aggression. How hard a dog "mouths" is dependent upon his bite inhibition. Bite inhibition is first learned in the first seven weeks of life, when puppies are able to romp and roll with each other in the litter. During play, a puppy will make a loud squeal if a littermate bites down too hard. This teaches the littermate the appropriate degrees of putting his mouth on humans and other dogs. Bite inhibition is also learned as a mother dog weans puppies off of her milk. Learning bite inhibition is critical for puppies so that, as adult dogs, they know what is appropriate and what is not. Owners can also help their puppy learn bite inhibition within the first sixteen weeks of life.

Different types of mouthing behaviors in dogs

Playful mouthing

- Your dog sees mouthing as a form of play

Demanding mouthing

- Your dog mouths you in order to get attention

Over-stimulated mouthing

- May occur if your dog is frustrated and aroused by stimulating things in the environment; increased arousal = increased mouthing



Many people think that mouthing is a form of dominance. It is not. It is simply a behavior that has somehow been reinforced to a dog. Your job is to withdraw the reinforcement and redirect the dog to a positive behavior.

Ways to reduce mouthing

Don't reinforce the behavior

- If your dog is mouthing you for play, don't reward him by playing back! This tells your dog that you are playing also. Dogs don't understand when we yell at them to stop certain behaviors; a high pitched tone and loud command may come off as an initiation to play to your dog. It is always best to ignore the behavior by standing still and crossing your arms. When your dog calms down, simply acknowledge him with a "Good boy" cue or a treat.
- If your dog is mouthing for attention, make sure you do not give-in to his demands! Ignore him until he stops. Only "give-in" to his demands if he stops mouthing.

Effective time-outs

- For more detailed information see our sheet on effective time-outs
- You can place your dog in an un-stimulated environment (a cage or a small room) when the behavior occurs. Release him only when he has calmed down.

Make an aversive sound

- Puppies will make loud, screeching sounds to signal when a littermate has played too hard. This sound is something we want to replicate to teach our dog when they have played, or mouthed, too hard with us. A high-pitched "EEE, IE, IE" should make your dog disengage the behavior. When he does, reward him.

Always use positive-reward based training methods

- Never hit or punish your dog for mouthing behaviors; rather, reward him when the behavior stops. See our sheet on Positive Reinforcement for more information.

Trade with your dog

- If your dog mouths as a form of play, teach him that your body parts are not toys!! When he mouths you, replace your arm or hand with a toy. Reward him for using the toy instead of our arm.
- Never pull your arm or hand away from the dog, as this can make him bite down. You can push your arm gently into his jaw, which will cause a slight discomfort for him that will lead him to disengage. Reward him for disengaging!

Learn basic training cues

- Being able to communicate with your dog is the root to decreasing mouthing behavior (and other adverse behaviors!) See our sheet on different training cues to learn basic commands such as Sit, Stay, and Down.
- When your dog mouths, you can make him sit to calm down, and then reward him for doing so.
- Basic obedience skills will provide structure for your dog and help support good communication. When you have good communication with your dog, you can help sculpt his behavior in the right direction!

For information on classes with Animal Friends, visit our university page at www.thinkingoutsidethecage.org

