

Curb Mouthing/Play Biting – Adult Dogs 2024

(This document is for older puppies and adult dogs. If you have a puppy younger than 6 months in age, please refer to our Puppy Basics document.)

Aside from chewing, a common way in which dogs utilize their mouths is in play. It's very natural and (to a certain extent) acceptable for dogs to use their mouths when playing with one another. It's up to us humans to teach them that doing so is not acceptable when engaging with people.

The following describes graduated steps to curb Mouthing/Play-Biting behavior. Please take each step one at a time and follow it for a couple of weeks before moving onto the next step. If you can curb your dog's mouthing behavior using only Step One, then stop there. Only proceed to the next step in this training if you've put in some effort and time at one step but your dog is not responding to the training or showing only minimal improvement. For some dogs, mouthing/play-biting has become an unfortunate habit and breaking that habit will take a bit of time and effort, but all dogs can learn.

It's important that you remain calm during all of these training steps but if your dog is getting more amped up (mouthing you even more) as you utilize these techniques, then it may be an indication that it's time to move to the next step in the training process.

Note: If your dog is mouthing a young child in your home, see the section at the end of this document on how to address this behavior.

Step One: Redirect

Keep plenty of dog toys handy. You may need them in different areas of the house and your backyard. When you are playing/engaging with your dog and she takes hold of your hand/arm/leg during play try not to react at all – don't say anything and try not to pull your hand/arm/leg away. Make the body part go still and therefore uninteresting to your dog. Then quickly grab a toy and stick it right next to your dog's mouth. You may need to "activate"(wiggle/wave) the toy to make it interesting so your dog will want to take it. If she does take the toy, continue to play with her and the toy – it's her reward for doing the right thing. You can also verbally praise her for taking the toy, "good dog!" Reward your dog every time she takes a toy instead of your body.

You may have to repeat this process many times in the same stretch of playtime and over the course of days/weeks, before your dog begins to understand that your body is not a toy.

Step Two: Remove all attention

If your pup isn't responding after several attempts to redirect, and/or the mouthing/play bites become more intense, calmly say "no" or "eh eh" and then immediately walk away. Don't talk further to them and don't interact with them in any way. Simply remove yourself from them. To your pup, suddenly the game has stopped. With enough repetitions, they'll come to understand that being mouthy is what causes the fun to go away. Following this, if you catch your pup go to a toy or politely (not jumping or mouthing) approach you, you will give them lots of praise and re-engage them in playtime.

Note: Yelling or yelping when your dog mouths/bites you may excite your dog even more, the opposite of what you want.

Step Three: Aversives

Aversive tools are not harmful in any way, they are simply meant to momentarily interrupt negative behavior so that you can redirect the dog to a more positive, reward-able behavior.

When using an aversive you will always give a verbal correction, "no" or "eh eh", right before using the aversive. You want your dog to understand there is a consequence to not stopping when they hear "no". This way they can either choose a better behavior and be rewarded, or choose to continue to mouth and experience something more unpleasant. When telling your dog "no" or "eh eh", say it once and be firm but do not yell.

Try to keep the aversive somewhat hidden (in your back pocket or on a high shelf near where the negative behavior typically occurs). We want your dog to eventually respond to your verbal command only, and not the sight of the aversive tool. The goal is to use an aversive for only a short training period. If you overuse an aversive many dogs will become immune to the tool rendering it ineffective. Always start with the lightest correction. Only increase intensity slightly as needed.

We recommend two types of aversive: spray bottle of water or a "shake" can. Most dogs find at least one of these tools unpleasant. It may take trial/error to find which one is best for your dog. Don't use an aversive that frightens your dog. Choose the tool that momentarily startles your dog without making him/her afraid (cowering, shaking, trying to hide, are signs that the tool is too frightening for your dog.)

If you use a spray bottle, set the nozzle set to stream, not mist. When using, aim first for the dog's feet. If spraying feet is ineffective, you can aim for the neck/head area but try to avoid eyes. For a "shake can", empty a soda can and add a few

pennies then tape it closed. You will start this tool by *gently* shaking it near your dog's head. Only increase the intensity of the noise if your dog is not responding to a gentle rattle/shake noise.

With the spray bottle/shake can held behind your back, when your dog mouths you, try not to move your arm/leg, tell her "no" or "eh eh", spray her with a quick stream of water (or shake of the can) then quickly move the aversive behind your back again. In that moment your dog pauses, ask them to "sit" (if they know "sit") and/or hand your dog a chew toy (you can also drop the toy on the ground). Don't forget to praise your dog for sitting or taking the toy (doing what you've asked)!

Step Four: Time Outs

If your dog continues to mouth you and is ignoring repeated use of an aversive, you will now raise the consequence by using a "time out". It's important to do this the right way so your dog will understand *why* she is getting a "time out".

Have your dog wear a drag leash when you are home, or in the yard, with her. This is just a lightweight leash that your dog will drag around as she wanders around the house. You will use this leash as a "handle" which allows you to direct your dog to the time out place without touching your dog – thereby making sure your dog isn't getting the attention she is trying to get via mouthing.

Pick out a word or phrase to indicate she has "lost" and going to Time Out (e.g., "Time Out", "I'm sorry", "Too Bad", etc). Say your Time Out word, pick up the leash, turn and briskly walk to the time out area. Avoid talking or interacting with the dog any further as this could be mistaken as rewarding attention to your dog. Be neutral when you say your time out word. The "punishment" isn't coming from you or the place where you put her. The "punishment" is the social isolation and loss of freedom.

Inside Time Out Spot: This can be a laundry room, bathroom, or extra room. Do NOT use your dog's crate, bed, or cozy space for time out. Time out is a punishment zone and you don't want your dog to suddenly resent being in her crate or bed. Make sure there are no toys or treats in the time out space. You want it to be less pleasant than where she usually is (with you!) so she learns to avoid the unwanted behavior that got her here.

Outside Time Out Spot: Have a tie-down spot in your backyard where you can clip your dog and walk away.

Time Out starts when the dog is removed from you and should only be 3-5 minutes (for adult dogs). However, if your dog is whining, barking, or throwing a temper

tantrum then you need to wait until they are quiet and calm before they can come out of Time Out. So the first few times she might be in Time Out for a longer time, but that's okay. When she comes out, ignore her for two minutes and then resume life as if nothing ever happened. This is their second chance to hopefully choose a better and rewardable behavior! If your dog repeats the unwanted behavior, she goes right back to Time Out for another 3-5 minute interval. If your dog continues to choose unwanted behavior after coming out from Time Out, you can increase their Time Out duration a few minutes each time.

Don't forget to always reward your dog for making good choices, like grabbing a toy instead of your body so she understands what you DO want from her.

MOUTHING ON YOUNG CHILDREN

It's hard for young kids to remain calm when a dog mouths them so it's important that you supervise all interactions between your dog and your children until you can fully trust your dog to no longer mouth people. When kids yell or pull their arm/leg away from a dog, it can be exciting for a dog. Your dog may think it's play time and become even more mouthy and possibly hurt (unintentionally) your child. For this reason, when it comes to young children it is OK to start the training using an aversive tool (make sure *you* are the one utilizing the aversive).

While supervising your child's interactions with your dog, and if age-appropriate, you might teach your child to "freeze" rather than yell or run away when your dog mouths. This could make it seem like a game and therefore less scary to your child while you quickly jump into action to correct your dog (by trading for a toy and/or using an aversive).

If you know your dog gets really rowdy at certain times of the day, be intentional about burning the dog's energy appropriately through physical and/or mental exercise prior to this time in hopes of minimizing the unwanted mouthing. Likewise, if you see that your child's style of play is getting your dog overly excited, you will want to separate the dog during this play time until you've trained your dog not to mouth.

When it comes to dogs and young children, we don't want to take any chances so please contact our your shelter's behavior team or a behaviorist for more assistance if you're struggling with your dog's behavior.