



# Sussex Brighton and East Grinstead Branch

Registered Charity No. 206630

## **CHEWING AND MOUTHING**

Puppies use their mouths to explore the world around them, and to play. They might especially chew or mouth when they're teething, as they lose their baby teeth and gain their adult teeth by around 7 months of age. It's all perfectly normal behaviour for dogs, but they run into problems if they start chewing or mouthing us or our belongings. This is behaviour we humans find unacceptable, as it hurts and can cause damage to our property, but of course they don't understand that! They just know that to them, it's fun and feels good. If chewing and mouthing isn't dealt with in an appropriate way when the dog is a puppy, this behaviour can carry on past adolescence and into adulthood. This becomes a more serious issue as although there is no negative intention behind it, if the dog is older/bigger, it can hurt more and cause more damage.

### **How puppy mouthing and biting starts**

It starts in the litter. They have sharp teeth and bite their litter mates. This causes the litter mates to cry, but most importantly move away. This teaches pup that interaction is removed when they bite. They then enter our home and the same thing happens with us. However, we are not other puppies or dogs, so we need to handle it differently.

### **Why puppies mouth/bite**

Firstly, we need to make sure these needs are met, as these reasons can cause the Mouthing/biting, or make it worse. Reasons your dog/puppy may mouth:

- Boredom
- Hunger
- Over tiredness
- Over exciting times, known in the dog world as over arousal
- Curiosity (they don't have hands)
- Exploring the world and seeing where the boundaries are

- Teething (depending on age)
- Frustration

### **Routine**

Create a routine that you follow as closely as possible to make sure your dogs needs are being fully met, to avoid the above reasons from being the cause of or an escalating factor in the chewing and mouthing behaviour. A good routine should include enough of the following, based on age and breed type:

- Sleep
- Food
- Toileting opportunities
- Exercise
- Play
- Enrichment (our enrichment handout will have lots of good ideas)
- Training

### **Calmness and consistency give your dog a clear message**

It can be incredibly frustrating for owners while puppies are learning what things we are happy for them to chew and those that we are not, because they simply do not understand the difference so might chew absolutely anything!

Because chewing and mouthing are normal dog behaviours, we need to give our dogs plenty of opportunities to do these in a safe and acceptable way. If we are clear and consistent about what things our dogs/puppies are allowed to chew and mouth, then they will learn that they can enjoy these behaviours without creating any problems.

With any aspect of dog training, it is important to remain calm, be consistent, and always reward good behaviour. If your puppy chews appropriate objects, reward them by giving them treats and your attention, or having a game with them, but withdraw your attention if they chew the wrong things.

Puppy/dog-proof your environment. Make sure you remove prized possessions or put them out of reach. Using a playpen or child-gates is a great way to restrict your dog/puppy's access around the house – but always make sure they always have fun and safe things to chew in their zone!

Provide a range of suitable toys and chews for your dog/puppy to play with. Try soaking these in water and freezing them to help soothe sore teeth and gums if your dog is teething. Keep a selection of toys aside so that you can swap them daily to keep your dog interested! Remember to praise them when they chew on the right thing and join in and have a game with them as this is a great way to reward them!

Try to keep a toy handy for when your dog/puppy is feeling playful, so you always have something appropriate to let them have in their mouth. Recognising signs that your puppy is getting ready to play, such as an increase in energy, bouncing, pouncing and hitting things with their paws for example. This means you can give them the toy before they start chewing or mouthing at you. This way you're showing them how to get it right from the start.

Avoid rough and tumble games, where your dog/puppy may learn to enjoy biting you as part of the game, or you'll risk them expecting to be able to play like this whenever they want and with whoever they want. Your dog will find it very hard to understand that mouthing you is sometimes okay but sometimes not and that is really confusing.

Dogs/Puppies really need a consistent message – mouthing us is never okay - otherwise they'll become confused and could become worried or frustrated.

### **Dos and don'ts!**

Here are some of the dos and don'ts for when your dog/puppy is mouthing/biting and in general, in relation to avoiding or stopping mouthing episodes.

#### **Don'ts:**

- Make sure not to try to imitate litter mates with a yelp. This doesn't work as your dog is fully aware that you are not another dog. Also do not scream or shout, as this adds more energy and excitement to the situation and will cause it to escalate.
- Try not to run or flail arms, for the same reasons as above. Instead, walk very slowly when pup is around, to avoid making chasing your feet and ankles more fun!
- Don't ignore your dog, by obviously turning back on them, as this causes frustration and can cause pup to escalate her behaviour. Instead go and do something else, like make a cup of tea (or pretend too and ignore pup in this way).
- Don't tell off, or stare your dog down.
- Make sure not to hit pup or tap your dog's nose (not that you do!). No punishment is needed to get desirable behaviours. Negative interactions can leave a lasting mark.
- When you notice your dog getting over excited, stop energetic activities such as encouraging chase. The only energetic activity that should be encouraged during mouthing episodes, should be redirected tuggy play or redirection onto a toy, until an enrichment item can be reached, to give pup, to calm the situation down.
- No fetch in general. Fetch is not a good idea in general for our dogs, due to adrenaline release and damage to bones/joints/soft tissues. One or two ball throws won't hurt, but make sure it isn't over a great distance or too repetitive.
- Never wake up a sleeping dog/puppy
- Make sure not to put your hand in or near your dog's mouth when mouthing, even gentle mouthing. Any sign of it happening, remove hands and your attention.

**Dos:**

- Make sure needs have been met. Is pup tired, hungry, bored? Etc...
- Pre-empt biting episodes. Identify the time of day, areas of your home, or activities that seem to trigger mouthing episodes, more so than at other times. Get in there first, with play and use the appropriate play technique when playing (see our handout on appropriate play for more information) and have a 5–10-minute tuggy session, with an enrichment item, such as licki mat to end and make it clear the play session is done and enrichment to bring energy back down.

- Have a special tuggy toy for worse times of the day but also have lots of toys that you rotate every few days to keep them fresh. Toys should include a cuddly toy, a tuggy toy, a ball, and a wood imitator, such as a chew root or antler.
- Stay calm and quiet as possible if your dog/puppy starts mouthing and you don't have a toy. Try to ignore them and do something else (but avoid having no toy on you or nearby at this stage).
- If ignoring isn't working, then grab your nearest toy to redirect pup onto.
- Have tuggy toys available around the house, garden, or on your person to redirect pup onto.
- Redirect onto the toy to avoid teeth on skin, until you can go and get some enrichment such as a licki mat or scatter feeding for a positive time out.
- Get pup engaged with a game of tuggy with the toy, by dragging the rope to encourage chase and pouncing and eventually latching onto the toy.
- After tuggy, grab a licki mat or safe puppy chew etc, to bring pups energy down and signify the end of play.
- If biting continues after tuggy and enrichment after to calm down, remove attention and leave the room for 30 seconds and return. Repeat a few times if it continues.
- If biting still continues then pop pup in a safe area, such as a playpen or baby gated off area, with something nice to do to calm down (this should be last resort).
- Ditch the food bowl! Play "find it" using puppy's kibble or treats or scatter feed dry food, or put wet food in kong and freeze. Try to ditch the bowl for at least 2 meals per day and use pups' food as an opportunity to keep her busy and to burn her energy in a positive way.

### **Extra help**

If you are struggling please get in touch with a qualified behaviourist. These can found by copying and pasting the following link into your web browser:

<https://www.rspca.org.uk/adviceandwelfare/pets/general/findabehaviourist>