



# Puppy Mouthing

## An Educated Mouth

All dogs have the potential to bite and the ability to break bones with their teeth. Thankfully, dogs can and do easily learn to be gentle with their mouth. Bite inhibition is a dog's ability to control the pressure exerted by their mouth during a bite, causing little to no damage. Dogs use body language to communicate with other animals, including humans. A bite is at the far end of a long line of dog behaviors used to communicate stress and discomfort. To show distress, a dog typically starts with body tension, freezing, lifting the corners of their lips, and hard eye contact. If the perceived threat does not heed these initial warnings, the dog may escalate to growling, snarling, showing teeth, and air snapping. Then if the perceived threat still does not back off, the dog may actually bite.

A foolish mistake some people make is punishing a dog for growling or providing other warning cues. These warning cues are an important form of dog communication and should be respected rather than punished. A dog that is growling is saying, "Please back off; I don't want to bite." Punishing a dog for growling can cause them to suppress the behavior and learn that it is not safe to let you know when they are uncomfortable. Ultimately, this can result in a dog that bites without warning.

## Early Life Lessons

The ideal time for a dog to learn bite inhibition is early puppyhood. Puppies begin learning bite inhibition during the early formative weeks while living with their mother and littermates. The lesson that a puppy learns early on is that good stuff is likely to go away when the puppy uses their teeth too hard. If a puppy bites their mom too hard while nursing she is likely to get up and move away, leaving the puppy without access to milk. Once the puppy is a little older they will start to play with their littermates. If the puppy bites too hard during play, their playmate is likely to squeal and run off, ending the fun.



Puppies that leave the litter too early or that are orphaned by their mother are much more likely to have a hard bite and can have a low tolerance for frustration. Ideally, a litter will stay with their mother for the first six to eight weeks.

**Tony La Russa's Animal Rescue Foundation**

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## Puppy Attack

When your puppy comes to live with you, they will need to continue developing bite inhibition and will need to learn how to use their mouth gently with people. Your job during this time period is to gentle down their bite, rather than eliminating it altogether. If at any point in your dog's life, such as when they take treats or toys from you, or when they are playing, their mouth does make contact with a human's skin, it is important for them to know to use little to no pressure. Your dog may just be playing or excited, but without good bite inhibition, they may not understand that hard mouthing is inappropriate. The way to gentle down your puppy's bite is to, at first, target only the worst offenders. After they have learned a nice gentle bite, you can then start working on eliminating mouthing or nipping altogether.

### The Four R's to Teaching Bite Inhibition

1. **Remove attention:** Determine the pressure of your puppy's hardest bite and focus only on those at first. When your puppy bites very hard, say "Ouch!" as if they have just caused you some pain (which may be true in some cases). Immediately stop paying attention to them; remember you are "ending the fun" by removing your attention. If your puppy pursues play, you may need to get up and leave the room for a few minutes. Once your puppy is calm, you may reengage with them.
2. **Redirect:** Undeniably, puppies have moments of high arousal and are more likely to bite hard. Rather than attempting to practice "Ouch & Remove" during those times, opt to play a game of tug or give them something to chew. They will learn that toys are an appropriate outlet during those crazy puppy moments. The redirect rule is especially important when there are children around. Children should be armed with soft toys or have easy access to them in rooms where they may encounter the puppy. Children should be coached to offer the puppy a toy rather than squealing and running away - a game most puppies can't resist.
3. **Reinforce soft mouthing:** Your attention and interaction is very valuable to your puppy. That is why we can teach puppies so much by removing interaction when they do things we don't like. On the same token, you can use your attention to reinforce behaviors you do like. When your puppy begins to demonstrate a softer, more inhibited bite remember to praise and continue to play with them. That helps Puppy make the distinction between play continuing when Puppy uses a soft mouth and the "Ouch & Remove" when Puppy bites too hard.
4. **Repeat:** Like humans, puppies learn best through repetition. Be patient with your puppy and pay attention to small signs of progress. It will take time and many repetitions of "Ouch & Remove" before your puppy begins to put together the big picture. Puppies have a strong need to bite and chew. At first, you will only "Ouch & Remove" for bites that actually hurt. Over time you will gradually give feedback on slightly softer bites until your puppy is biting with little to no pressure at all. Remember, if you try to immediately eliminate biting altogether, you're likely to have a frustrated puppy that hasn't learned an inhibited bite.

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