



Dogs Don't Have Hands: Dealing with Nipping and Chewing

Chewing and nipping are normal puppy behaviours. Puppies use their mouths for many reasons:

- to explore their world
- to relieve discomfort from teething
- to alleviate boredom
- in response to something that triggers prey drive

Puppies normally learn to control the intensity of their bite when they play with each other. A puppy who bites too hard will soon find that the play ends as puppies who receive a hard bite will run away from the game. Singleton puppies, or those who leave the litter early often do not learn to have a gentle (or soft) mouth when they are very young. Other puppies may regress a bit when they no longer get the feedback from littermates.

Some breeds (such as retrievers) typically have softer mouths by virtue of many generations of breeding to build the ability to retrieve game without damaging it. Other breeds, bred for different activities may have a naturally more vigorous bite. For example, a terrier, bred to tackle vermin may have only one chance against a vicious badger if he encounters one in a den - for him, a soft mouth is a liability rather than an asset.

Nipping: The combination of needle sharp puppy teeth and the tendency of puppies to chase and grab things that move make puppy nipping a common issue that new owners find a real challenge.

1. When nipping or biting is triggered by movement of hands or clothing – immediately stop and be still. Use a click or verbal marker to mark the moment your dog lets go. If you do not have a treat in your hand, praise your dog, pick him up and run to find a treat (I recommend picking him up for this exercise to avoid triggering more nipping as you move quickly to get the treat.)
2. When your puppy nips during play or cuddles – immediately break off contact. Briefly step away, step out of the room or stand up and turn your back to the puppy. (You will often see a recommendation to yelp, just as a puppy would in response to a hard bite. This can trigger increased arousal in some puppies. If you use it, watch his response and if it seems to increase his arousal, eliminate the yelp.) If nipping is consistently followed by a short “time out” the puppy will learn quickly that nipping stops the fun. Time outs should be short (seconds to a minute or so), unemotional and always followed with an opportunity for your puppy to make the correct choice. In order to help your puppy make a good choice after the time out, use a toy as in #3.
3. **Substitute** a toy when you see your puppy preparing to nip. Encourage your puppy to play with a toy and engage in tug games with you. Praise him when he chooses to take the tug instead of your arm or clothing and spend a few moments playing. A soft braided fleece is a great redirection toy and getting in the habit of carrying one in a pocket ensures it is readily available when needed.

4. **Manage it:** If your puppy is in a nippy mood or you can predict when nipping is likely to occur, use management to prevent the behaviour. Put your puppy in a crate with something yummy to keep him occupied, happy and out of temptation's way. Putting your puppy in a crate or Xpen is NOT a punishment. Be sure to do it calmly and make it a good experience by using special treats. Some puppies will become more nippy when overtired – so be sure to learn your puppies daily rhythms and provide appropriate rest periods.
5. **Teach 'follow my finger'** – following your finger is an incompatible behaviour with nipping. If your puppy is focused on following a finger, he cannot be nipping at the same time. Hold a finger in front of your puppy and click as he moves forward to investigate, reward. Repeat this several times. Then hold out your finger and slowly move it away from your puppy – click and reward when he takes a step forward to follow your finger. Slowly build the behaviour until your puppy can follow your finger as you walk around.
6. **Teach a 'soft mouth'**
 - a. Place a low value treat (kibble, cheerio) in your closed hand and let your puppy explore it. If your puppy sniffs, licks, or mouths your hand with no more than a light touch with his teeth – open your hand and let him take the treat. It is helpful to mark the right behaviour with a click or verbal marker.
 - b. If you feel teeth firmly on your hand – remove your hand for about 5 seconds (place it behind your back and ignore your pup – a mini time out). No verbal corrections.
 - c. If your puppy bites firmly – walk away for about 10 seconds and ignore him (time out).
 7. As your puppy learns to control his mouth, raise the criteria so that any mouthing or tooth contact results in withdrawal of the treat. Increase the value of the treat in your hand to increase the challenge and help strengthen his understanding.
 - e. If your puppy has difficulty with this game and can't get past first base, back up and start by offering a treat on an open palm – many puppies that will try to bite a closed fist will not bite at an open hand.
 - f. Be careful not to jerk your hand away when playing this game as this may trigger a 'chase and nip' response.
7. **Help children deal with nipping** – children naturally behave in ways that encourage nipping: rapid erratic movements, high pitched squeals. Teach children to immediately stop moving, keep their hands on their chest and look away from the dog when the puppy starts to nip. Having young children wear rubber boots when in proximity to nippy puppies can help protect tender ankles. Have them carry a small favoured toy (to toss, older children can use it to play a gentle game of tug). Older children can be taught to use a 'close mouth' cue. To teach this, when puppy starts to nip, remove hands and wait. The moment the puppy closes his mouth, click and toss a treat. After a few repetitions start saying 'close it' just as the pup closes his mouth. Repeat this game every time the puppy gets nippy. Once the puppy seems to understand the game, start giving the 'close it' cue before removing hands and click / reward for closed mouth.

Chewing

Like nipping, chewing is a perfectly normal and functional canine behaviour, especially common in, but not restricted to, puppies.

1. **Manage it:** Keep items you do not want chewed out of reach. Shoes are a prime target for many puppies. The best place for shoes and other items that puppies like to chew is behind closed doors. If your puppy chews electrical cords you can raise them

out of reach or feed cords through lengths of 1 inch PVC or ABS pipe to protect them until your puppy has finished the chewing phase. You can also purchase purpose made plastic tubing impregnated with something that has a bad taste – but I find the odour from this product to be quite intolerable and pervasive. For furniture chewing, options are to confine the puppy so that he does not have access to the furniture, or if his chewing is targeted to a specific item, temporarily remove the item. Confinement of your puppy when not directly supervised is important for many safety reasons including chewing. Be sure you place X pens or wire crates away from anything he might be able to pull into the pen and chew. What about anti-chew substances? A variety of bitter solutions are sold for use on items we do not want puppies to chew. Unfortunately most of these are not highly effective unless you first condition your puppy with an intense exposure – something which will associate you with a bad experience and be damaging to your relationship.

2. **Substitute:** ensure your puppy has lots of good / safe items to chew – bully sticks, raw meaty bones, nylabones, antlers etc. Be careful about leaving stuffed toys, plastic or rubber toys and rope accessible when puppies are going through a chew phase as they can easily chew pieces off and swallow them resulting in obstructions and expensive vet bills! When you catch your puppy chewing on something he should not, use a positive interrupter and offer him something better to chew! Be sure to supervise your puppy when chewing and remove items that are getting to swallowing size.

Be patient with puppies – the nipping and chewing will improve as your puppy matures. In the meantime, ensure your puppy's safety and set him up for success by limiting triggers for nipping and chewing.