

# Puppy mouthing

## Audit information

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## Introduction

This protocol is recommended for your dog. Please do not share, copy or use for another dog as each individual case is different. This protocol teaches you how to teach a puppy (or a dog who has developed the habit) to make wise use of their teeth and never hurt you with them.

## Why do we call it 'mouthing'?

A mouthing dog uses their teeth on something/someone with no aggressive intent. They are too rough in playing, taking food or greeting.

Sometimes the dog walks a fine line between mouthing and aggression, and serial mouthing in excitement can lead to aggression later in life. If you suspect your dog might be showing aggression, rather than mouthing, please contact us early so we can tackle this together.

So, whilst most puppies mouth (we call them 'Labrasharks' with their needle-sharp teeth), it is essential we teach them to take it easy with their teeth.

We don't want to let dogs use their set of teeth like a knife-wielding maniac.

## What causes it?

Mouthing is multi-factorial:

1. The pup hasn't yet learnt to control their bite strength
  - a. in play/excitement
  - b. when greeting
  - c. when taking food
  - d. when grabbing an object
2. Overstimulation and fatigue
3. Teething

At any given time, factors 1-3 can weigh in differently, depending on the individual dog and their developmental phase.



## How to address it?

### Teaching to control mouthing strength in play

**What dogs will this benefit?** Dogs who quickly become over-excited (in play or during other exciting situations), and start biting hard at hands and legs in over-excitement.

**Session frequency/duration:** Each session should be no more than 5 minutes long, and should have plenty of repetition of the relevant words 'yes' and 'ow'. As the dog understands more and more, you'll say more and more 'yesses' and fewer and fewer 'ows'.

**What you'll need:** a door, a rope toy, a chew.

#### The steps:

1. Start playing with the dog using a rope toy in the opening of a door.



2. When the dog works their way up the toy and to your hand AND when the dog bites you in a painful way (dogs may bite softly, it gets them to practice bite control), say 'ow' and stand upright, taking the toy up with you.
  - a. Be sure the dog knows you've said it. Don't say it under your breath.
  - b. Do not scream it. There is no need to startle the dog out of his mind. Just say it clearly enough that the dog notices it through his excitement.
3. Two things could happen:
  - a. If the dog withdraws, immediately say 'yes' and resume playing. Repeat, repeat, repeat.
  - b. If the dog gets more excited (most likely, as we are only just teaching him what 'ow' means), say 'ow' again, and disappear behind the closed door.
  - c. The dog might scratch, whine, etc. Ignore this religiously. As soon as the dog calms down (it may be a few seconds), say 'yes' and open the door again. Start again and again.
4. Close the play session by saying 'finished' and making a gesture with your hands. The gesture doesn't matter, if it is always the same and clearly visible/memorable to the dog.
5. Place a chew (raw hide strips work wonders) in front of the dog's nose and escort the dog to 'his bedroom' or his crate. Let him enjoy his chew there.



**Solemn promise:** When playing with the pup outside of these training sessions, avoid getting them over-excited. Favor calmer games if the pup is in a hyper mood. [Here](#) are some ideas. This avoids you getting stuck in a vicious cycle where you nag the dog ineffectually (getting them more excited in the process) for doing something you knew he would.

## Teaching to control mouthing strength when greeting

**What dogs will this benefit?** Dogs who jump up against guests and yourselves to mouth at their hands or trouser legs.

**What you'll need:** Have some of his daily food allowance ready at the door so you can intercept the dog before he mouths you when he comes to greet you at the door.

### Steps:

1. As soon as he comes barging to you but BEFORE he bites, place a treat in front of his nose and say 'chase'. Toss the treat down the corridor. As the dog chases the treat (away from you), advance into the house and tidy your things away.
2. Each time he returns whilst you are still busy tidying your things away, intercept him with a 'chase' then treat before he gets overexcited by your jacket flaps, etc.
3. Repeat the 'chase' routine as many times as you need to finish your return-home routine and walk in the house.
4. Keep going about your routine, each time interrupting him just before he bites you. Do not wait too long or he will make contact. If he does, you'll have to follow the [play routine](#).
5. After a few repetitions, the dog will shift his focus from your trousers/hands to the treat in your head. When you feel you are there, then withdraw the treat until he sits. Do not ask him to sit: we are teaching him to show self-imposed self-control. As soon as he sits, resume the game.
6. When you're done with your coming home routine (including walking in and, perhaps, sitting down), then close the play session by saying 'finished' and making a gesture with your hands. The gesture doesn't matter, if it is always the same and clearly visible/memorable to the dog.
7. Place a chew (raw hide strips work wonders) in front of the dog's nose and escort the dog to 'his bedroom' or his crate. Let him enjoy his chew there.
8. After he's enjoyed his chew and is over his exuberance at your return, he can be let out of his crate with no fuss, and he can then greet you calmly.

**Goal:** A dog who sits back when you walk in the house, expecting you to play the 'chase' game. As time goes by, you can follow through with the 'chase' game less and less often and the dog has taken the habit of sitting back to greet people at the door. Keep playing the chase game occasionally so the dog does not return to his bad habits.



**Guests:** When it comes to guests, [management](#) is your friend. Do not put your dog in a situation where you know he is going to fail and you will get flustered and must nag him with ineffectual ‘no’s. If you’d like to teach your dog not only to behave himself when you come home, but also when guests are there, ask a few guests to volunteer for the above-mentioned ‘chase’ routine.

## Teaching to control mouthing strength when taking food

**What dogs will this benefit?** Dogs who not so much take food from you, as pillage you to get there.

**What you’ll need:** Tiny pieces of kibble

### The steps:

1. Bring yourself to dog level (e.g. sit cross-legged). Make yourself comfortable.
2. Pinch a tiny treat between thumb and index finger
3. Bring this to dog level so he can investigate
4. Chance it the dog will maul you: trying to gnaw or scratch the treat off your hand.
5. Say nothing, do not push him back. Just keep clenching the treat.
6. If the dog jumps up, bring the treat in front of his nose and lure him back down.
7. The microsecond the dog withdraws (as in the nose of the dog is no longer in contact with the treat), say ‘yes’
8. Then open your hand and let the dog have the treat.
9. Repeat, repeat, repeat.
10. When you’re done with your coming home routine (including walking in and, perhaps, sitting down), then close the play session by saying ‘finished’ and making a gesture with your hands. The gesture doesn’t matter, if it is always the same and clearly visible/memorable to the dog.
11. Place a chew (raw hide strips work wonders) in front of the dog’s nose and escort the dog to ‘his bedroom’ or his crate. Let him enjoy his chew there.

**Solemn promise:** Combine this with the solemn promise that you will not ever let go of food he has grabbed roughly. He needs to wait until you give him permission before he gets food you are holding in front of him, and he needs to take it gently.

## Teaching to control mouthing strength when grabbing an object

**What dogs will this benefit?** Dogs who jump up and chase kids to grab at their toys, and dogs who tend to jump up and grab objects from you.

**What you’ll need:** A rope toy

### The steps:

1. Dangle a rope toy in front of the dog
2. Give him permission to grab it BEFORE he snatches it
3. Play with him and the rope toy.
4. Say ‘let go’ in a clear but friendly voice (you are still playing tug of war)
5. Place a treat in front of the dog’s nose (you are still playing tug of war)
6. The dog lets go? Immediately say ‘yes’ and immediately release the treat whilst at the same time discreetly hiding the rope behind your back.
7. As soon as the dog has finished his treat, repeat.
8. As he becomes better and better at this, wait until he sits back before you give permission.



**Solemn promise:** Combine this with the solemn promise that you will not ever let the dog snatch an object off your hands before you've given him permission. We are not suggesting you punish the dog for snatching, we are suggesting you manage your environment, so he never has that temptation, and that you ALWAYS give permission before he snatches something.

## Dealing with overstimulation and fatigue

**What dogs will this benefit?** Every – single – pup. Particularly if you notice that yours bites a lot.

**Catching some zzzz's:** The average dog sleeps 12-14 hours per day, and the average pup will sleep 18-19 hours per day. Like kids, they get cranky when they don't get to shut down and process today's impressions.

**What you'll need:** A safe and comfortable play pen or a dog crate away from the family's hubbub, where the dog can be left unsupervised to recover from the day's stimulation.

### The steps

1. On days 1-3, note the times of day and note what had just happened before (e.g. family back home from school) the dog gets cranky and mouthy
2. After that, 5 minutes before the crazy would normally come out, place a chew (raw hide strips work wonders) in front of the dog's nose and escort the dog to 'his bedroom' or his crate. Let him enjoy his chew there. Do not get the dog out until he has had a nap.
3. When you let him out, do so with no fuss.

**Solemn promise:** You will not put the dog in situations that they can't handle yet (e.g. the market, the pet store, etc.). If you want to teach them to not become overstimulated by certain situations, you will need to habituate them carefully and systematically. Pushing them in at the deep end will only reinforce bad habits.

After a few days of a regular nap schedule, the puppy's body will adapt and will wind down ahead of these moments, so putting them down will become easier and easier.

Don't overdo this and isolate the dog from the family constantly. We are just saying the pup needs a lot of downtime to recover, rest and grow.

## Dealing with teething

**What dogs will benefit:** Teething dogs. You know your dog is teething if they start mouthing at objects (and sometimes people) more often. You can also find the milk teeth they've lost, or you can find some blood on objects/chews they've chewed.

**Teething troubles:** Their 28 baby teeth come through between weeks 3 and 10. At 2-7 months, their 42 adult teeth will start to come out:

1. Incisors: 2-5 months old
2. Canines: 4-6 months old
3. Premolars: 4-7 months old
4. Molars: 5-7 months old

So, you're in for about 7 months of on-off teething troubles.

### What you'll need:

1. A freezer
2. Raw hide (irradiated, not bleached. Inner skin layer, not epidermis)
3. Teething rings



4. Nylabones
5. Or any safe, durable, chew that will not splinter and that, when small enough to be swallowed whole, can be disposed of.



**The steps:** Ask at the pet store what puppy-appropriate chew toys they have.

1. Put them in the freezer
2. Run them under water briefly, so they do not stick from the frost
3. Give them to the dog and let them sooth their aching gums for 30-40 minutes.



If your dog is uninterested, consider smearing something on them like canned puppy food (watch out for the mess, though).

## What's going to get you

You can perform the best training sessions in the world and still hit trouble because you don't follow a few golden principles. Let us help you stay out of trouble:

### Management

Outside of these training moments, keep the dog out of trouble through pro-active Management.

Do not get annoyed at him misbehaving in a situation where he never has behaved well. You cannot expect an instant change, so you do not get to get annoyed with the dog. Be proactive and keep him out of trouble, or you will be caught in a vicious cycle of nagging/exciting the dog in real-life, and your dog won't make the bridge between his training skills and these real-life situations.

At any time you do not see yourself reacting to mouthing with the training protocol (because you are stressed, pressed for time, feeling socially inappropriate, etc.), then pro-actively manage.

Your pup gets crazy whenever he greets you, but you have important guests today? Then 'park' him in 'his own bedroom' or in his crate until the hubbub of coming home has died down.

What is just the right level of management? Not too little and not too much:

1. Rely too much on management and your pup will never learn, or it will be a slow process.
2. Fail to use management (thus pushing the pup in at the deep end, in a situation where you know he will mouth) and you will be strengthening the habit.

The key is a mix of pro-active management and frequent training. If you manage to train for a few very short (couple of minutes) high-repetition sessions per day, with a variety of people in a variety of situations, the pup should learn in a matter of days.

He bites, what now? If you have time for training and are feeling patient, greet every inappropriate mouthing moment with joy: 'Yes! I get to train this in a real-life situation, catching him in the act'

### Prognosis

Rome wasn't built in a day. Do not be discouraged if this takes a few days, and if there are some relapses. It's part of the process. The dog is asking questions 'What happens when I do this?', keep answering consistently and he'll get it. You get the idea it's going nowhere? Log progress, you'll be surprised.

### Proofing

Practice in more and more real-life settings/situations so the dog can bridge the gap between the skills he's learning in training and real-life moments.



## Working with food

When working with food, remember to take the food quantity for training from the dog's daily allowance. We do not want to cause a weight problem for your dog.