



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

Strategies you can use to address puppy nipping:

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.

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 a kong filled with something yummy to keep him happy and out of temptation's way.
5. **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).
 - c. If your puppy bites firmly – walk away for about 10 seconds and ignore him (time out).
 - d. As your puppy learns to control his mouth, you can raise the criteria so that any mouthing or tooth contact results in withdrawal of the treat.
2. You can also increase the value of the treat in your hand to increase the challenge and help strengthen his understanding of a soft mouth.
 - a. 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 your open hand.
 - b. Be careful not to jerk your hand away when playing this game as this may trigger a 'chase and nip' response.

Chewing

Like nipping, chewing is a perfectly normal and functional puppy behaviour. Chewing may serve several important functions for your puppy:

- alleviate boredom
- soothe sore gums
- self soothing

1. **Manage it:** Keeping items you do not want chewed out of reach is the key. 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 try to raise them out of reach. You can feed cords through lengths of 1 inch PVC or ABS pipe to protect them until your puppy has passed through the chewing phase. You can also purchase purpose produced 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.
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, simply offer him something better to chew! Be sure to supervise your puppy when chewing and remove items that are getting to swallowing size.