

Puppy Mouthing, Chewing, and Housetraining

Puppies are adorable, until one day you discover your puppy has turned your couch legs into chew toys, your antique rug into a toilet, and your hands into squeaky toys (only the squeaky noises are coming out of *you* when you yelp in pain from those sharp puppy teeth). Not all puppies will chew on inappropriate items, eliminate on your floor, or even nip at hands yet all of these behaviors are not uncommon during puppyhood. Puppies teeth to approximately 8-9 months of age, so chewing and mouthiness is just part of the teething process. Like human babies who do not enter the world potty trained, puppies do not enter the world housetrained. Housetraining a puppy typically takes several months so be patient.

The following are recommendations on what can you do to prevent puppy behavior problems from starting, or correct them once they have already begun.

Preventing inappropriate chewing and hard mouthing

- 🐾 Provide plenty of chew toys such as Nyla bones, stuffed Kong® toys, Buster Cubes®, Tricky Treat Balls™, bully sticks, etc. Always supervise your puppy when he is chewing on his toys.
- 🐾 Hand feeding your puppy can serve to teach him how not to bite down hard on hands because ultimately he is being rewarded for having a soft mouth. Offer him the treat, holding it tight in the palm of your hand or between your fingers. If he bites hard, do not release the treat and say “uh uh.” Put your hand behind your back for several seconds and try again. Release the treat only when he softens his bite pressure. Repeat and continue to reward him for taking the treat with a softer mouth. Children and the elderly should not engage in this exercise if the puppy is prone to hard mouthing.
- 🐾 Enroll your puppy in socialization and training classes. All of the puppies in class should have already received their first round of vaccines, be parasite free, and the training facility, preferably indoors, should be maintained in a hygienic manner. Puppies can learn to control their bite pressure by playing with other puppies.
- 🐾 Have puppy play dates in your home or in the home of other puppy owners. Be sure that all dogs are up to date on their vaccinations. If adult dogs are involved, make sure they are dog friendly and know how to play gently with a puppy.
- 🐾 Provide physical and mental stimulation. Go for walks, play fetch with your puppy, practice basic obedience with him, purchase puzzle toys for him, etc. Again supervise your puppy while he is engaged in play with the puzzle toy to ensure that he does not chew or ingest any part of the toy.
- 🐾 If your puppy bites your hand hard while playing with him or while giving him treats, let out a high pitched “ouch,” stand up, turn your back on him, and walk away for 10 seconds. Return to playing with him and repeat the process if he bites hard again.
- 🐾 If your puppy is still biting down hard after a couple of weeks of conducting the recommended exercises, or is becoming more aroused and biting harder after hearing the high-pitched “ouch,” discontinue the exercises and contact either a Certified Applied Animal Behaviorist (CAAB or ACAAB), a Diplomat of the American College of Veterinary Behaviorists (DACVB), or a Certified Professional Dog Trainer (CPDT).

Housetraining your puppy

- 🐾 Keep your puppy on a regular feeding schedule.
- 🐾 Take your puppy out to eliminate as soon as you wake up in the morning, and just before going to bed at night. During the day, take him out every half hour, 15 minutes after meals, and immediately after he has taken a nap or has engaged in play. As soon as he squats use a cue word such as “go potty.”
- 🐾 Take your puppy to the same elimination spot so the existing scent encourages him to urinate (or defecate).
- 🐾 Remain outside with your puppy so that you can reward him with treats, praise, or even play as soon as he eliminates.
- 🐾 Most importantly, when your puppy is not engaged in play or training, being walked, eating his meals, or being directly supervised by an adult he should be placed in his crate. If he has free rein of your home he is likely to scamper off and eliminate somewhere on your floor, or even eliminate in front of you since young puppies do not think they are doing anything wrong. It is reasonable to expect puppies to have some accidents indoors. Once several weeks have passed and he has fewer accidents indoors he can be allowed more free time out of his crate. In addition to aiding in his housetraining, crating will help to prevent your puppy from engaging in inappropriate behaviors such as destructive chewing, will help him get used to traveling in a car or airplane, and may help him get used to being boarded. Puppies aged 4-6 months old should never be crated for over 3 hours at a time. Puppies 8-16 weeks old should only be crated for an hour at a time during the day, except during the evening when everyone goes to bed.
- 🐾 If your puppy has an accident in the house, do not yell at him. He may think that the act of eliminating in front of you is wrong. This may unintentionally teach him not to go to the bathroom when you are around (lest he get yelled at!). Instead, clap your hands loud enough for him to hear but not loud enough to scare him, quickly scoop him up and carry him outside or gently guide him outside if he is too big to pick up. Do not drag him by his collar. This creates tension around his neck that does not feel good. You may wind up with a dog who runs from you whenever you reach for his collar, or growls or even tries to bite you when you go to pet him around his head. This may also set him up for a bad veterinary experience if the vet tries to look into his ears or exam his teeth.
- 🐾 If he eliminates indoors, clean up the area with an enzymatic cleanser. Do not use ammonia-based products as this will attract your puppy back to the same spot.

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