

Puppy Biting and How the Right Puppy Toys Can Help



Ouch! You might ask what puppy biting has to do with puppy socialization. Answer: a lot! The [sensitive period for socialization](#) is a great time to teach puppies that hands predict good things for puppies. And that toys are better for biting and chewing than human body parts.

The day before you brought your puppy home, guess how he played with his brothers and sisters? He used his teeth, he used his paws, and he tried to wrestle with them. Guess how he's going to try to play with you? He's going to use his teeth, use his paws, and try to wrestle with you! Think about it. How else would a baby puppy play? They haven't learned any human interactive games yet. For puppies, biting at things that move is as normal and natural as breathing. Or as a baby grabbing at your hair as they learn to grasp things. It is normal puppy behavior to chase and bite at moving things, especially things near their face or head. Your young puppy isn't being aggressive or naughty. He's normal! We want to redirect that normal and natural biting behavior to appropriate outlets. The goal at this age isn't to stop your puppy from biting. It's to teach him to bite toys instead of people.

It's Normal. Now What?

Play with Toys, Not Hands

Understanding that biting is normal puppy behavior doesn't make it any less painful when those needle-sharp teeth pierce your skin. Our job, as owners, is to understand that biting and chasing are normal behaviors in puppies. And to shape those natural tendencies into behaviors that work for the owner and the puppy. A win-win!

Puppies often bite to get your attention, to get you to play, or because your hands or clothing are moving in exciting ways for puppies. Since you want to teach him that hands and body parts are off-limits, show him what he **can** put in his mouth when he wants to play: a toy! Puppies need a variety of toys appropriately sized for their tiny mouths. You may have a large breed puppy, but right now even he has a puppy-sized mouth. That giant rope toy you bought for him may be nice when he grows up. It's not an appropriate toy for him when he's a puppy.



Make sure your pup has a variety of toys made from different materials and textures. Some puppies have preferences: cloth, rubber, sheepskin, or linen, to name a few. Keep a couple of toys around that your puppy naturally likes to put in his mouth. Use the toys to redirect those sharp teeth to something more appropriate.

Toys for Interactive Play

Dr. Karen Overall (2013) suggests that "Effective human play with dogs enhances the relationship between the dog and the human, reduces the incidence of behavioral problems, and encourages the humans to think that their dogs are very clever (Rooney and Bradshaw, 2002, 2003)." Interactive toys are special toys reserved for playing with humans. **We do not leave those toys down for the puppy to access all the time.** Put these toys out of the puppy's reach when you are done playing. They are not chew toys. Saving the toys for play with you makes them extra special and keeps the toys and your puppy safe (he won't chew them apart or ingest pieces).

For these types of cooperative play (like tug), I prefer long-handled toys that put distance between where the puppy bites and where your hands hold. Like babies, puppies need and like to put things in their mouths. Dragging a toy while you're walking gives the puppy something he can chase and put in his mouth instead of ankles, shoes, and the bottom of your bathrobe.



Soft toys with long handles, like the ones shown, are great interactive toys for puppies. They put distance between puppy teeth and your body parts. Even children can participate in puppy play (supervised) [as shown in this video](#).



Clean Run and 4 My Merles both have a wide variety of excellent toys for puppies and dogs. Check out the resources at the end of this post for links.



As your puppy gets older, you may want to transition to toys with shorter handles. But at this age, longer toys are great!

Toys for Chewing

There are so many things we don't want puppies to put in their mouths: cell phones, eyeglasses, rugs, shoes, and on and on. The list is endless. It's important to have plenty of items puppies can put in their mouths. Just like our interactive toys, it's important these toys are appropriately sized for puppies' mouths.

We do want chew toys that cannot be easily destroyed or torn apart by puppies (like the interactive toys above!). These toys should be durable, too.



Many pet retailers have a good supply of puppy toys for chewing. Chewy is one of my favorite retailers for puppy chew toys. Make sure to select the right size for your puppy and his style of chewing.

The toy shown on the left might be appropriate for a small or medium size puppy when you bring him home. It might be too small for a giant breed puppy.

As your puppy's body and strength grow, inspect toys regularly to make sure your puppy isn't chewing off pieces. Also, make sure you remove smaller toys and provide larger, more durable toys as your puppy's size and strength grow.

If you are unsure whether an item is suitable for your puppy, check with your veterinarian.

Toys for Dispensing Food

In addition to the toys that are mentioned above, food dispensing toys are a must. Once your puppy learns how to use them, these toys can engage your puppy and keep him busy. I'll say it once more: puppies need to put things in their mouths. Providing him with plenty of appropriate options is win-win.

I (Marge) recommend that owners feed puppies a portion of their meals in food dispensing toys. What are the benefits of feeding your puppy part of his meals this way?

- He learns to entertain himself instead of looking to you to entertain him every moment of the day (morning coffee anyone?).
- He develops a preference for what you want him to chew on (he gets reinforced for chewing on his food toy).
- Food toys provide mental stimulation and enrichment. They are the doggie equivalent of coloring books and crossword puzzles.
- They help drain puppy energy.
- They can help your puppy form positive associations with his confinement area.



That's a lot of bang for your buck for a food toy. There are many food toys on the market. Be creative! Here are two of my favorites. These toys are available at Clean Run and many pet retail outlets.



Yikes! He Got Me!

Despite your best efforts, your puppy's teeth are going to make contact with your skin. It happens, just like when toddlers grab your nose, clothing, or hair. It's normal puppy behavior. Let's say I'm playing with my puppy with a toy and he decides it would be easier to bite my hand. When that happens, I'm going to remove my attention and my hands for 3–5 seconds (not 3–5 minutes) and then re-engage with him. Most puppies will bite a bit softer or even lick. I'll let the softer bites go for now and continue to remove my attention for the harder bites. When they are all "softer bites," I'll remove my attention for those. I am shaping the puppy's behavior to bite softer and softer before I teach him not to put teeth on people at all.

To Yelp or Not to Yelp

Well, sometimes you just can't help it. It hurts! Just like it's normal for puppies to bite, it's normal for people to yelp when something hurts them. I do not recommend yelping or saying "ouch!" *if you can help it*. I realize that sometimes it's a reflex. But there is a population of puppies that will get **more** excited by your exclamation. Game on! You sound like all those squeaky toys you bought for your puppy. So it rarely works as a training method to get the puppy to quit chomping.

Calm Hands and Voice

Hands that move quickly and vigorously around puppy heads are very likely to get bitten. People who are afraid of getting bitten by those sharp puppy teeth often move their hands in ways that encourage puppies to bite them. Huh? Imagine someone who has already been a victim of puppy biting. They move their hand in over the top of the puppy's head like a claw and the puppy turns to look at the hand and they pull their hand away quickly, afraid of being bitten. They just made their hand "hop like a bunny." Puppies like to chase things that run away from them, including hands! They also often squirm and bite when being petted with two hands rather than one.

Dr. Karen Overall recommends what she calls SMART pet. Petting with long, slow strokes, with pressure. You don't want to use so much pressure you push the puppy over. Use just enough for him to lean into the pressure. Start at the collar and move slowly down your puppy's back to the base of his tail. You can also pet the side of his body. Additionally, petting dogs and puppies on their chests in a slow, circular motion can be very calming.



You can see how different types of petting impact whether this puppy bites or not.



[You can see how different types of petting impact whether this puppy bites or not \(click for video\).](#)

Along with calm hands, you want to use a calm voice. I (Marge) tell my clients to use the tone of voice they would use if they were trying to get a baby to sleep. High, happy voices get puppies excited. I try and use a low pitch and speak slowly: "Gooooood booooy."

Management

There are times you will do everything right and you still get a bitey puppy. You remove your attention if he targets you and direct him to appropriate things to put his teeth on and your puppy is still coming at you like a T-Rex. Sometimes puppies (and owners!) just need a break. Like overtired toddlers, the pups are just done. That's where management comes in.

The very first thing I do when I have a puppy coming into my house is set up a puppy playpen. Your puppy doesn't know he could die if he chewed on an electrical cord. (Sadly, this happened to a puppy in a friend's care.) And he doesn't know the difference between the toys you bought for him and your glasses, the remote control, or your furniture. He really doesn't. So until he learns what stuff is his and what stuff is yours, it's important to contain him to keep him safe, protect your stuff and give him a restful space when he (or you!) need some downtime. A puppy playpen is a great way to do that.

Crates, baby gates, leashes, and tethers are also forms of management. They won't teach your puppy to stop biting (he will most likely grow out of that on his own), but they help you manage him and give him a safe and restful place to be.

Management not only helps with puppy biting (I can use that leash to hold the puppy at arm's length while I walk him to his pen), it makes housetraining much easier on the people. If my puppy is tethered to the leg of the chair I'm sitting in, I'm more likely to notice if he gets up and starts sniffing around in preparation to eliminate because he's right next to me.





Things You Shouldn't Do

In the worst puppy biting case I ever had, the owner was told by someone to hold the puppy's mouth shut when he bit them. I can tell you for sure that this didn't teach him not to bite. What he did learn is that hands near his face cause pain. He did everything in his power to keep hands away from his face. How do you think he did that? He learned the best defense is a good offense.

Besides holding puppies' mouths shut, "back in the day" we were told to do all types of crazy things to puppies, like fold his lip over his teeth so when he bites you he bites himself. Can you see where these techniques can backfire? We want puppies to think hands near their face are a good thing.

Review

- Puppy biting is normal
- Teach the puppy how he can play with you
- Provide appropriate outlets for biting and chewing
- Use calm hands, voice and SMART petting
- Manage puppy behavior using crates, baby gates, leashes, and tethers
- Teach puppies that hands near their faces are good (leave outdated techniques in the past)

Some puppies have very "soft" mouths and quickly learn to be gentle. Other puppies and breeds of puppies have harder mouths and it takes much longer for them to learn to use their mouths softly. Whether your puppy passes through the biting stage quickly or slowly, he will pass through it. Be consistent, follow the steps above, and you'll be on the right track. And most importantly, appreciate the puppy stage. They grow up so fast!

Resources

- Denise Fenzi has a great post on puppy behavior: [It's a Puppy, Not a Problem](#)
- [Clean Run](#): Search for "puppy tug toys" and look for soft toys that are the right size for your puppy's mouth and long handles
- [4MyMerles](#) has a nice selection of toys for puppies and small dogs
- [Chewy](#) has a variety of toys of different materials and textures

References

- Overall, K. L. (2013). Manual of clinical behavioral medicine for dogs and cats. Elsevier, St. Louis.
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