



Living With “Jaws”: A Survival Guide For Puppy Mouthing

Dr. Jen’s Dog Blog

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If you have a new puppy, or are expecting one this holiday season – congratulations! You’re embarking on a life-changing adventure full of ups and downs, especially during those fragile first few months.

If you’ve had a puppy before, or spent much time around one, you know exactly what I mean. Snuggles on the couch, the first day home. Soft puppy kisses, a tiny wagging tail. Hopping clumsily after a ball in her very first game of fetch. Barking and play-bowing to a puppy “twin” in the mirror. These are the things that we all love – the things that bond us so closely with our new pup, filling us with wonder and affection for this tiny, perfect creature growing up before our eyes.

And then, of course, there are the not-so-fun parts that come with the package. We're all familiar with these as well! Cleaning up potty accidents. A pair of shoes destroyed. Cold, rainy trips outside to pee in the middle of the night.

And tiny, sharp, utterly insatiable puppy teeth. On everything. ALL THE TIME.

Welcome to Puppy Parenthood 101.

Aside from housetraining, I would say that puppy biting and mouthing is the single most common behavior issue that prompts new puppy owners to ask me for help. So this week, I wanted to take some time to delve into this topic and hopefully provide some helpful tips if you're currently sharing your home with an adorable, furry set of constantly biting teeth.

So – why in the world do puppies do this? And is there anything we can do to stop it?

Let's tackle the most basic question first. The most important thing to understand about puppy mouthing is that it is a completely, one-hundred-percent normal behavior.

Stop and let that sink in for a moment, before we go any further.

I find that this is a surprise for many puppy owners who are accustomed to thinking about biting and mouthing as a "behavior problem" that needs to be trained away as quickly as possible. The fact is, it's not a behavior problem at all. All puppies do this. They *should* do this. They're *supposed* to do this. It may be annoying for us, but it's a normal part of their development.

And so, my first piece of advice is this: be patient.

Your puppy puts her mouth on everything because this is the only way she knows how to interact with the world. Babies of every species are curious and want to explore their environment; human toddlers are no different, save for the fact that they have hands to grab with. Your puppy grabs with her mouth – she picks up objects to see what they feel like, bites down to see if they're good for chewing, explores their texture and whether they can be ripped into pieces for fun.

Among the things she grabs with her mouth are your hands, your sleeves, and your pant legs. This is how puppies instinctively want to play – if you've ever watched a group of puppies wrestling with each

other, you know that teeth are part of the game. Young pups bite and chew on their littermates constantly, as part of their normal social interaction in the whelping box.

I harp on this point because I truly believe it's important. A puppy who bites your hands isn't "bad" or defective in some way – she's just displaying normal species-specific behavior for a young dog. This puts the burden on you to manage your interactions with her to help avoid problems, and to have patience and empathy while she learns.

And this, of course, brings us to the next obvious question. Even if we understand that biting and mouthing are normal things that puppies do, they can still be quite problematic in a human household!

So what can we do to help keep our hands, clothing, and possessions intact with a puppy in the house?

Fortunately, the answer is: plenty! Keep in mind that our goal is not to "stop" this behavior or train it away – it will resolve on its own with age. Instead, we want to find ways to make this normal developmental period as painless and stress-free as possible for everyone involved.

Listed below are the most important steps you can take to keep your sanity:

Manage the environment.

Being a new puppy owner is a lot like having a toddler in your home. Just as new parents must purchase plastic plugs for their electrical outlets and put child safety locks on the bathroom cabinets, you need to make some basic preparations before turning your pup loose to explore.

Shoes, books, purses, loose papers, and articles of clothing must be kept off the floor at all times – either safely locked away in a closet, or on a shelf out of your puppy's reach. Yes, it's a pain. But you have to do it. No exceptions. Anything even remotely interesting that is left within reach will likely be destroyed. So if your pup shreds your favorite pair of sneakers, just remember that it's your fault – not hers. Consider yourself warned!

If your puppy has a particular affinity for table legs, baseboards, or other things that can't be easily placed out of reach, you have two options. First, you can use a baby gate or other barrier to block her access to areas where these things are. Or, apply Bitter Apple spray to the surfaces she likes to chew on – it's nontoxic but tastes terrible, so she can discover on her own that table legs aren't any fun to chew on. This is much less stressful for both of you, versus constantly scolding her for chewing the furniture.

Provide a variety of age-appropriate toys and treats for chewing.

Remember that puppies have a hard-wired, instinctive need to bite and chew on things – if you don't provide an appropriate outlet for this behavior, your pup will find her own!

This is one area where I often find there is room for improvement. Even dedicated puppy owners who are trying to do everything right may not be providing enough variety to keep their pups busy. Or, they may have a pile of what they think are great chew toys at home... but their puppy doesn't like them. Dogs have their own preferences about what they enjoy, just like people – so it may take some trial and error to find what works for your pup.

To give you some ideas, here are a few of my favorite options for chewing:

- Bully sticks
- Cow or pig ears
- Large rawhide chews
- Kong toy or Twist-n-Treat filled with peanut butter
- Everlasting Treat Ball
- Kibble Nibble or Tug-a-Jug filled with kibble

This is by no means an exhaustive list, so feel free to comment with your own suggestions if you have a favorite that I didn't mention! If you're not sure where to get things like this for your puppy, I will also provide some links at the end of the post with information on where you can find them

Redirect, redirect, redirect.

And then redirect some more! In all seriousness, it can sometimes feel like this is a full-time job with a puppy in the house. You need to have a variety of different toys available anytime you're playing with your pup. No teasing her with your hands or fingers, or using your shirt sleeve for an impromptu game of tug – it might seem cute for a moment or two, but obviously, this is not a habit we want to teach!

If you're playing with your puppy and she bites your hands, grab one of her toys and use that to play with her instead. What kind of toy, you ask? Well, that depends entirely on what your puppy enjoys. I would suggest having lots of different types on hand – long floppy rope or fleece toys for tugging, plush squeaky toys for biting and carrying, and smaller toys or balls for chasing or fetching. Practice different ways of tossing her toys, or wiggling them enticingly along the floor until you learn what makes her light up with excitement.

What about petting? If you're trying to pet or snuggle your puppy and she bites you, calmly stop petting and ignore her until she calms down. If your pup is particularly excitable and mouthy, you may find that you can only pet her when she's sleepy and in the mood for cuddles – this is perfectly okay! Just respect the fact that petting is too over-stimulating for her sometimes, and wait until she's ready.

Don't punish.

I know, I know... it's tempting. Especially when your neighbors, co-workers, distant relatives, and the guy you saw at Petco are constantly giving you "helpful tips" on how to stop your puppy from biting. I'm sure you've heard the suggestions – pinch her tongue until it hurts, hold her mouth shut, smack her nose and say "no!", spray her in the face with water. The list goes on.

I know that these suggestions are well-intentioned. But none of them are necessary, and all have the potential to do lasting harm.

The problem with punishment in this situation is twofold. First, it does nothing to help your puppy understand what she should do with her mouth. Remember that this drive to bite and chew on things is deeply hard-wired in young puppies – she was born with an instinctive need to put her mouth on something, all the time. She cannot just "stop it", any more than she could stop eating, or breathing, or going to the bathroom. So instead of correcting her for this perfectly normal impulse, just redirect her to something more appropriate.

Secondly, and just as important – punishing your puppy in this way can have far-reaching behavioral consequences once she's grown. There will be many times in your dog's life when you will need to put your hands near her face, or your fingers in her mouth. You will need to look at her teeth, give her medication, and even remove things from her mouth on occasion if she grabs a chicken bone from the garbage.

If your puppy learns that hands around her mouth are painful or scary, these things will be exponentially more difficult when she's older. She needs to feel safe when you touch her or reach for her face, so don't do anything to poison this trust.

So, the million dollar question... when does it end???

Although it might feel like forever, most puppies are biting and mouthing much less by the time they are 8-10 months old, and fully grown adult dogs (older than 2-3 years) virtually never use their mouths the way that puppies do. Like everything else, there is some individual variation – so your particular puppy might grow out of this phase a bit earlier, or a bit later, than average.

But the most important thing to remember, is that there is a light at the end of the tunnel So be patient and consistent, and remind yourself that things will get easier.

Your pup will eventually get it – I promise!

Below are links to some of the chew treats and puzzle toys I mentioned above. Feel free to skip this section if you don't need it!

For cow ears, pig ears, and rawhide chews, the best online source I have found is [Raw Feeding Miami](#). Their stuff is all natural, not processed with any chemicals or artificial ingredients, and great quality. They are out-of-stock on certain items fairly frequently because they make things in small batches, but if you check back in a week or so they always get them back in.

In my area, it seems to be difficult to find food puzzle toys in local pet stores, so I order most of these online as well. Amazon carries just about all of them, but they can also be ordered from Petco, Petsmart, or online retailers like dog.com.

(Links provided here are Amazon affiliate links.)

Twist-n-Treats – these are a great alternative to a Kong. Similar idea, but much easier to clean since the toy comes completely apart and can be put in the dishwasher. My favorite refillable crate toy for puppies.

PetSafe Busy Buddy Twist 'n Treat Dog Toy, Small

PetSafe Busy Buddy Twist 'n Treat Dog Toy, Medium

PetSafe Busy Buddy Twist 'n Treat Dog Toy, Large

Everlasting Treat Ball – a really good long-lasting chew toy. It's basically an edible, flavored hard disc-shaped treat that's stuck in a very durable rubber casing. Tasty enough to keep most puppies interested, but difficult enough to eat that it takes quite a while to finish the treat. You can also get refills in a variety of flavors, to help keep things interesting.

Everlasting Treat Ball Small

Everlasting Treat Ball Medium

StarMark Everlasting Treat Ball, Large

The Kibble Nibble and Tug-a-Jug are two ways of feeding an entire meal out of a puzzle toy – they're designed to put your puppy's breakfast or dinner inside, so that she has to spend some time and brain power working to get each piece of kibble out, rather than just inhaling everything from a bowl in 30 seconds flat. I'm a big fan of these as well. You have to feed your puppy anyway, so might as well use it as an opportunity to keep her busy for a bit.

The Kibble Nibble is the easy, "beginner" version – basically an egg-shaped hollow ball with a small hole at each end. Rolling the toy around will make the kibble fall out, one piece at a time.

PetSafe Busy Buddy Kibble Nibble Meal Dispensing Dog Toy, Small

PetSafe Busy Buddy Kibble Nibble Meal Dispensing Dog Toy, Medium/Large

The Tug-a-Jug may be a bit difficult if your puppy doesn't have much experience with puzzle toys, but it's my favorite "advanced" option for dogs who are bored with easier toys. It requires quite a bit more problem-solving ability to get the kibble out – great fun to watch, if you have a smart puppy who enjoys figuring things out

PetSafe Busy Buddy Tug-A-Jug Meal Dispensing Dog Toy, Small

PetSafe Busy Buddy Tug-A-Jug Meal Dispensing Dog Toy, Medium/Large