

Modifying and Managing Adolescent & Adult Mouthing

Adolescent and adult dogs who exhibit mouthy behavior tend to also be social, energetic, playful, and outgoing. These dogs typically jump up and grab people's clothing or limbs with their mouths when they are feeling frustrated, excited, or seeking attention. The amount of pressure a dog mouths with varies and - if not addressed - may become severe enough to cause injury. It is not desirable for a dog to put their mouth on people's skin, clothes, or shoes, but fortunately there are several things you can do to modify and manage this behavior.

PLEASE NOTE: While the majority of dogs mouth in a social, attention-seeking manner with loose, wiggly bodies, some will do so in a more intense manner. When a dog has a stiff body and chooses to jump up and mouth in a way that begins to control your movements and limits your ability to move away, this is not a social play behavior. Instead, this is a way of attempting to control their environment and you should stop what you are doing and contact a certified, force-free, professional trainer for additional support. Some of the techniques below may escalate a dog's reaction since these behaviors are typically exhibited toward anyone who tries to passively or actively exert control.



WHS does **not** recommend or support aversive techniques such as holding a dog's mouth closed, rolling a dog on their back and holding them down (alpha roll), yelling, hitting, or any other physical punishment. These methods risk damaging your relationship with your dog and can result in escalation of the current behavior or even additional behavior problems.

Potential causes of mouthing

- Puppies without littermates and/or puppies who have been removed from their litter too early (before 8 weeks) may be more prone to mouthing as they mature. This can result from not having siblings to let them know they are biting too hard and, in turn, they do not develop appropriate bite inhibition.
- The dog has been positively reinforced for this behavior, even unintentionally, by getting rewarded with play time, your attention, or another outcome they find desirable.
- Inadequate physical exercise – dogs who have excess energy may inappropriately use their mouths in play.
- Inadequate mental stimulation – if a dog is bored, they may discover that they can get your attention and engage you in play by using their mouths (even if your reaction is not positive).

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Management

Everyone who interacts with your dog should **consistently** follow all management rules. People coming and going in the home can be very exciting and may trigger mouthing. Management is especially important when children or less mobile individuals are involved. Make sure that you and your guests are aware of and participating in the following practices during every interaction with your dog:

- Keep your dog on a leash, tethered to a sturdy piece of furniture in the room or behind a barrier (i.e., baby gate) to prevent mouthing during common problem times, such as when visitors arrive or when the environment becomes too exciting or stressful for your dog.
- When you return home after an absence, plan for a game of fetch or other physical activity that will burn off some of their energy before trying to pet them.
- Keep treats near the front door and around the house so that you are able to toss them on the ground to redirect your dog when they become too excited. The treats should ideally be tossed prior to them jumping up and mouthing so they do not see the treats as a reward for jumping/mouthing.
- Avoid any roughhousing with your dog, especially games that involve pushing and shoving. These activities can encourage your dog to use their mouth in inappropriate ways. Instead, engage in non-contact games like "fetch" or tug-of-war.
 - If playing tug-of-war with your dog, make sure you're using a large enough toy so they can't accidentally grab your hand, and ensure your dog knows the cues "tug" and "drop." If at any time the dog begins to put their mouth on your skin, calmly end the game and remove yourself to give them time to calm down. Playing tug with your dog does not cause aggression or dominant behavior, and it's okay to let them win!
- If your dog is mouthing, redirect their attention to a more appropriate item, such as a toy. When your dog's mouth is on the toy, reward them with lots of praise and attention. Keep a stash of plush toys and chews around the house, and try to determine the what triggers your dog's mouthing so you can offer them an appropriate item before they have a chance to mouth you.
- Always supervise children with dogs, especially when the dog is mouthy. The response from young children (screaming, running away, crying, etc.) may excite the dog more and can feel like a game for them. If mouthing does occur, an adult should be present to redirect the behavior and the child should end the interaction by exiting the area as calmly as possible. If





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a dog is persistently mouthy with children, it is best to keep them separated in the home while working on these behaviors. Your dog can be kept separate by using baby gates, a crate, or by being put in a different room with enrichment items like toys, a puzzle feeder, or a KONG stuffed with peanut butter.

- Increase the amount of exercise your dog is getting. You can do this by increasing either the number of play sessions or the duration. This will help them burn excess energy in an appropriate way and allow them to spend more time with you. Check out the “Exercise” handout for more ideas.
- Provide your dog with interactive toys and encourage them to work for what they want, which is typically food. Examples of interactive toys include Kongs, food puzzles, and treat-dispensing toys. You can rotate and switch these toys on a regular basis to keep them busy. Check out the “Enriching Your Dog's Life” handout for more ideas.
- Bitter Apple is a product that can be sprayed on human hands, feet, and clothing. It is designed to discourage dogs from putting their mouths on something by leaving an unpleasant taste in their mouth. **Never** spray bitter apple in your dog's mouth. This product can be purchased from the [Animal Antics store](#) at the Wisconsin Humane Society, and through other retailers.

Training

Management can help prevent the mouthing from occurring and being reinforced, but you may also want to train alternative behaviors to take the place of mouthing. Training will decrease the need for constant management and will help build a positive relationship between you and your dog. Most importantly, be sure to **always** reward your dog for desirable behavior in order for that behavior to increase in the future.

- To decrease unwanted behavior, one option is a “time out” or break. This is the removal of something the dog wants (ex. your attention) after they exhibit in an undesirable behavior.
 - If your dog places their mouth on you during play or at any time while you are interacting with them, calmly leave for about 30 seconds. When your dog is calm, you may return. If they continue to put their mouth on you, leave again and increase the amount of time you remain gone to 1 minute. Continue this until you can return to the interaction without your dog mouthing. When your dog does not put their mouth on you or offers a desirable behavior like sitting, make sure to reward them for that.
- Teach your dog a behavior that cannot occur at the same time as the mouthing/jumping, also known as an “incompatible behavior.” This can be achieved by utilizing mat work, sit-stays, and down-stays. If your dog is laying/sitting on their “mat” (ex. towel, blanket, bed, etc.) or in a sit/down-stay position, they can't be jumping up and mouthing at the same time.
- If mouthing occurs when people enter the home, cue your dog to “sit” and reward them before they can jump up and mouth. It is important that you are reinforcing “sit” frequently and in all situations. This ensures your dog will automatically put their bottom on the floor



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when they hear the word "sit" in different environments and at different distraction levels without requiring additional prompts or lures.

- Take your dog to a training class. Even if your dog attended a puppy class, additional classes can be a great refresher and can help re-establish appropriate boundaries. The Wisconsin Humane Society offers a [Manners Class](#) specifically for dogs 6 months and older.

Adolescent and adult mouthing can be frustrating and – at times – painful, so it is important to manage and modify the behavior right away. Don't hesitate to contact the Wisconsin Humane Society behavior department at asktheexpert@wihumane.org or 414-431-6173 if you need further support along the way.