

# ALL PUPPIES NIP, ALL PUPPIES CHEW

Based on a handout written for the *Denver Dumb Friends League* by Suzanne Hetts, Ph.D.

Having a new puppy in the house is lots of work! Puppies investigate their world by putting things in their mouths. They are also teething and often their gums are very tender. Chewing probably relieves some of this discomfort. Puppies also like to play and roughhouse by nipping at people's hands. Although this may be tolerable when the pup is little, it won't be as the puppy gets bigger. Being a puppy owner means having the time and patience to teach which behaviors are acceptable and which are not.

## NIPPING AND GENERAL "MOUTHY" BEHAVIOR

Most puppies will want to bite or "mouth" hands during play or when being petted. This is rarely true aggressive behavior. Because puppies get so excited and it is so normal for them to take things in their mouths, attempts to suppress the behavior are unlikely to be successful unless the puppy is provided with an alternative. The goal of working with this normal puppy behavior is to redirect the puppy's desire to put something into her mouth by giving her acceptable objects and teaching her to be very gentle anytime a hand is in her mouth.

**Encourage Acceptable Behavior** - A way to encourage acceptable behavior is to offer the puppy a small tidbit of food or a small rawhide chewie or other chew toy whenever you pet her. This technique can be especially effective when children want to pet puppies. As you reach out to scratch the puppy under her chin (not over her head) with one hand, offer a chewie or tidbit placed on your open palm with the other. This will help shy puppies learn people and petting are wonderful, but will also keep the puppy's mouth busy while being petted. At first, you may need to pet or scratch for short time periods so she doesn't get too excited. The more excited she gets, the more likely she is to nip.

**Discourage Unacceptable Behavior-** In addition to giving a puppy acceptable objects to chew, she must also learn to be gentle with hands, and that nipping hard results in unpleasant consequences for her. One way to do this is to teach your puppy that nipping "turns off" any attention and social interaction with you. You can either get up and walk away, or fold your arms and remain completely immobile without looking at her. At first, she may pester you for attention, jump, bark or pull on parts of your clothes. If you laugh, look at her, or give in, you've only taught her to be more out-of-control in order to get your attention.

Nipping can be discouraged by loosely holding either the puppy's lower or upper jaw after she has taken your hand in her mouth. Don't squeeze, just gently hang on so that where ever her mouth goes, your hand is still in it. This will quickly become tiresome for her. After several seconds, release her jaw, but continue to offer your hand. If you pull your hand back quickly, she is likely to pounce on it and repeat the behavior. If she licks your hand or ignores it, pet her and offer a tidbit. If she again closes her mouth hard on you, repeat the procedure. **Remember**, discouraging unacceptable behavior will *not be effective* unless you also teach the puppy the correct behavior with the tidbit approach.



**Things Not To Do** - Attempts to tap, slap, or hit a puppy in the face are almost guaranteed to fail, and may likely make the problem worse. Several things may happen, depending on the puppy's temperament and the severity of the correction. 1) The puppy could become 'hand-shy' and cringe or cower whenever a hand comes toward her face. 2) The puppy could become afraid of you and refuse to approach you at all. 3) The puppy could respond in a defensive manner and attempt to bite to defend herself. Lastly, she could interpret a mild slap as an invitation to play, causing her to become even more excited and likely to nip. Some puppies get overly excited with tug-of-war and wrestling games which make nipping more likely to occur. These types of games tend to encourage the puppy to compete with you, and to grab and lunge for you. You don't want to encourage these behaviors. Some puppies can play these games and know the limits of acceptable behavior, while others cannot.

### **CHEWING AND DESTRUCTIVE BEHAVIORS**

As a puppy owner, it is virtually inevitable that your puppy will at some point chew up something you value. This is part of having a puppy! You can minimize chewing problems if you "puppy-proof" your house similar to what you would do if you had a toddler. Put trash out of reach or use containers with locking lids. Encourage children (and spouses) to pick up the clothes and toys. Don't leave eyeglasses, briefcases and TV remote controls lying around in easy reach.

If you catch your puppy chewing on something she shouldn't have, call her to you and offer her an acceptable toy instead. Furniture and other items can be coated with Bitter Apple to make them unappealing. Because puppies investigate their world with their mouths, unfamiliar objects may be more likely to be chewed. Puppies may be less interested in their toys because they are always around. If you have 5 or 6 toys for your puppy, make no more than 2 or 3 available at any one time, and rotate your supply every few days. Rawhide chewies for teething may be particularly appealing. Don't give objects to play with such as old socks, old shoes, or children's old stuffed toys that closely resemble items which are off-limits. Puppies can't tell the difference.

**Crating And Supervision** - Close supervision is an important part of minimizing chewing problems. Don't give your puppy the chance to go off by herself and get into trouble. Use baby gates, close doors, or even tether the puppy to you with a 6 foot leash so you can keep an eye on her. When you must be gone from the house, either crate your puppy or get her used to staying in a small, safe area such as a laundry room. Be sure to crate train your puppy properly and not overuse the crate. Puppies under 5 months of age probably should not be crated for longer than 4 hours at a time (except possibly at night) as may not be able to control their bladder and bowels longer than that. Don't be surprised if you have to occasionally get up in the middle of the night to let a youngster out to go potty.

**The Role Of Punishment** - Never try to discipline, scold or punish your puppy after the fact for chewing something hours, minutes or even seconds before you discovered the evidence. Animals associate punishment with what they are doing at the time they are being punished. A puppy cannot reason that "I tore this up an hour ago and that's why I'm being scolded now". Owners often believe this to be the case because the puppy runs and hides or looks "guilty". Guilty looks are nothing more than submissive postures dogs show when they are threatened. Thus, the puppy is threatened by your tone of voice, body posture, and facial expression when you are upset and angry and therefore hides or cowers. Punishment after the fact **will not** improve a chewing problem and will do more harm than good as well as not being fair to the puppy.

### **OTHER TYPES OF DESTRUCTIVE BEHAVIOR**

Puppies can sometimes be destructive due to separation anxiety, fear-related behaviors, or attention-getting behavior. Contact a certified animal behaviorist for help with these more complex problems.