



Mouthing in Adult Dogs

What is “Mouthing?”

Mouthing is a term used to describe a dog that puts his teeth on human hands, feet and arms when he is feeling overwhelmed or overexcited. Mouthing isn't aggression, although it can be hard enough to hurt or break skin. When a dog is mouthing, his mouth typically will not stay in one place. For example, he might quickly put his mouth up and down your arm. He should have a loose, relaxed body. **If your dog's mouthing behavior does not seem friendly:** you may have a more complicated behavior issue on your hands, and may need some professional guidance. Please call our behavior helpline at (517) 626-6060 ext. 141 for more information.

Mouthing behavior can show up for several reasons. Stress, lack of consistency, under-stimulation, frustration, anxiety, a lack of socialization at a young age, or a combination of some or all of these reasons can lead to mouthing behavior in adult dogs.

Tips for Solving Your Dog's Mouthing Issues

Provide Adequate Physical Exercise

A dog that hasn't been exercised will often display inappropriate or unhealthy behaviors. Each dog's exercise requirements are different, but if your dog is mouthing, increasing the amount of exercise he gets is a good place to start.

Provide Mental Stimulation

This goes hand-in-hand with physical exercise, which is great for tiring out your dog's body, but you also need to tire out your dog's mind. Here are a few ideas for how you can do this:

- Feed your dog with a puzzle feeder, such as a Kong Wobbler or Buster Cube. You can even make your own puzzle feeder using an old muffin tin and tennis balls. Divide your dog's food into the muffin cups and place the tennis balls on top. Your dog will have to figure out how to move the tennis balls out of the way to get to his food.
- Teach your dog something new. This could be as simple as teaching your dog to sit or lie down. If you've already covered the basics, try teaching your dog to “sit pretty” (sitting with front paws in the air), do a figure 8 around your legs, or jump through a hula hoop. The only limit here is your imagination!
- If you have a yard, set up a digging pit for your dog. A small kiddie pool and play sand works great for this. Bury a couple toys and treats in the digging pit to give your dog something special to find.
- Give your dog a few toys to play with, and rotate them weekly to keep his interest.

- Encourage noncontact forms of play, such as fetch and tug-of-war, rather than wrestling and rough play with your hands. Keep tug toys in your pocket or in a place where you can easily access them. If he starts to mouth you, you can immediately redirect him to the tug toy. Ideally, he'll start to anticipate and look for a toy when he feels like mouthing.

Teach Your Dog Impulse Control

Teaching a dog to think before he acts is beneficial for many reasons – and teaching this concept can help him resist his mouthing urges. There are many different ways to teach this, but here are a few skills that will help your dog learn impulse control:

- Waiting at doors
- “Drop it”
- “Leave it”
- Stay

Training to Stop Mouthing

All members of the family should be involved in this training process, as well as any visitors, and the steps should be followed any time the dog mouths. It is important to avoid occasionally rewarding mouthing with continued attention. It may help to seek professional help from a positive reinforcement trainer to help the learning process go as smoothly as possible.

- Pay attention to your dog's body language and what he is doing right before he starts mouthing. Play with your dog the moment you notice him getting ‘worked up’ or overexcited.
- If she starts mouthing you, immediately remove all of your attention. You may even have to leave the room for about 30 seconds, ending play time. After many repetitions (sometimes weeks of practicing daily), your dog will start to learn that if she uses her teeth, play ends, however gentle play (without teeth), continues.
- If your dog mouths your feet or ankles, carry her favorite tug toy in your pocket. The moment she starts mouthing, instantly stop moving your feet. Take out the tug toy and start to play with her.

A Note on Punishment

Punishments like yelling can increase anxiety, and therefore mouthing. It is also important to remember that your attention is an extremely valuable resource, even if you're annoyed at your dog, so it is easy to accidentally reinforce mouthing if you try methods like pushing them off or moving the dog to a different room. Removing yourself works best, since it removes the reward. Remember that all dogs learn at a different pace, so be patient.

For more personalized behavior help, CAHS offers low-cost obedience classes, as well as a free Behavior Helpline. Call or email the Behavior Department for more information!

**(517) 626-6060 ext. 141
behavior@AdoptLansing.org**