



Mouthing

Mouthing is when a dog regularly grabs at people's limbs or clothes with his/her mouth without causing injury (except by accident). This behaviour usually occurs during play, while exercising or when the dog is excited. Although this behaviour is not aggression it is inappropriate and needs to be treated.

How to teach older dogs to be gentle with their mouth? Follow these guidelines:

1. **Make sure plenty of appropriate chew toys are available.** When/if he starts to chew something inappropriate, calmly redirect him to a proper toy. Praise him for chewing the correct items. Never encourage mouthing during play, such as during wrestling or “boxing” games. Select a toy for tug-of-war and play by a set of consistent rules: *I start the game, I end the game, the dog must give me the toy when I ask for it, and any teeth on my skin makes the game stop immediately.*
2. **Withdraw all attention if he gets mouthy.** If you've been playing with him, the game stops: immediately stop all attention and if possible pack the toy away or remove yourself from the area, e.g. leave the room. Only resume play after a long pause and when he's calm.
3. **Use consequences instead of punishment.** Punishing normal dog behaviour – or even abnormal dog behaviour – can create the very problems you're trying to solve. Physical or verbal punishment can provoke aggression in any dog, particularly in one that is aroused or over-excited. Avoid any methods involving force and intimidation, such as “alpha-rolling”, scruff-shaking, muzzle-grabbing and leash jerks. These do not teach the dog what he should do, and could lead to serious behaviour problems. Focus on removing the things your dog likes as a consequence for mouthy behaviour.
4. **“Make a trade” when your dog won't give up a forbidden item.** Hold a tasty treat under his nose and gently say, “drop” When he drops the item, give him the treat. The goal is to teach him to give you what he has in his mouth without becoming defensive. Trying to “show him who's boss” will make him less likely to give up what is in his mouth, and may teach him to react aggressively to you.
5. **Don't allow him to rehearse problem behaviour.** Does he chase the kids and mouth their legs when they play tag? Do you encourage him to play with old shoes or slippers? If so, this must stop. Either put him on leash with you or inside the house. Provide toys that do not resemble clothing or shoes. Does he mouth your leash-hand on walks? Use a head collar. Stop walking and pull steadily up on his head collar releasing the tension when he stops mouthing. Your dog will not learn proper behaviour by accident: he needs you to teach him.

The Doggy Centre
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6. **Be careful not to teach your dog to mouth you.** If your dog learns that mouthing you makes something good start – or something bad stop – he will continue doing it! Some dogs learn that jumping up and grabbing their owners gets them lots of attention, instead of time out. Others learn that if they don't want to be leashed up, gentle mouthing makes it stop instead of continue. Let the consequences teach the behaviour you want!
7. **Provide plenty of exercise.** Strenuous exercise won't teach a dog not to mouth you, but it will burn off excess energy that can exacerbate such behaviour. Long leash walks, fetch games, Frisbee (without high jumps), swimming and play with other dogs can all be helpful.
8. **Continue training appropriate behaviour.** Some dogs use their mouths because they've learned it gets a reaction from their owners. Teaching and heavily rewarding appropriate behaviour will give your dog "legal" activities that will earn him attention for the right reasons.