



Whole Dog Journal™

4 Puppy Biting Survival Strategies

Nipping, mouthing, teething - whatever you call it, here's how to get past this puppy developmental phase in one piece.

By Nancy Tucker, CPDT-KA

Puppies! Who doesn't love 'em? They're cute, cuddly, and silly. They look like little angels when they sleep, which is often. When they're awake, they spend all their time exploring and learning about the world around them. We marvel at their curiosity and playfulness - until we experience The Teeth.

Puppies explore with their mouths, which nature has equipped with rows of teeny-tiny hole-punchers. It's no fun being at the receiving end of a bitey pup. It hurts! It's no wonder that the leading complaint from puppy owners is "How do I stop him from biting?"

The short answer is: You don't! As Pat Miller explains in, "[Teaching Your Puppy Bite Inhibition \(/issues/20_5/features/Puppy-Bite-Inhibition_21639-1.html\)](/issues/20_5/features/Puppy-Bite-Inhibition_21639-1.html)," (May 2017), smart owners do everything they can to help their puppies develop "bite inhibition" over time.



It's impossible to have too many puppy toys. Make sure your pup's collection includes toys that are hard, soft, rubbery, crackly, chewy, stuffed, unstuffed . . . you get the idea!

However, this doesn't mean you allow your puppy to puncture and hurt you! There are a number of things you can do to manage a nippy puppy until your puppy outgrows this important developmental stage.

The following is a list of things you can do to keep your skin, clothes, and other belongings intact while your puppy works through the biting phase:

1. Get lots of chew toys. Seriously, lots of them. Don't skimp on the number or variety of chew toys your puppy has access to. Owners are often advised to keep only one or two toys out at a time (and to rotate them) so that their dogs don't become bored, but this does not apply to puppies!

Instead, make sure that there is an ample supply of appropriate things your puppy can pick up with his mouth as he explores his home. (Remember that to a puppy, literally everything in his path is a chew toy, so it's up to you to ensure your things – shoes, plants, remote controls, etc. – are safely stored.)

Further, when your puppy does pick up a toy, take advantage of the moment to reinforce this good behavior by showering him with attention. Think about it – if you ignore him when he picks up the correct item, but shout and jump around when he grabs your toes (or shoes), he'll quickly learn that biting toes (or shoes!) is a sure way to get your attention. Showing him that picking up a toy, instead, is indeed the best way to get your attention will pay off in the long run.

Get the complete story on a dog's need to chew things in, "[Take Control of Puppy Chewing \(/issues/19_3/features/Take-Control-of-Puppy-Chewing_21412-1.html\)](https://www.petmd.com/issues/19_3/features/Take-Control-of-Puppy-Chewing_21412-1.html)," (March 2016).

2. Introduce your pup to “latch ropes.” This doesn’t have to be anything special; the term describes any long item that can be dragged behind you as you move through your home.

Moving objects are an open invitation for puppies to latch on with their teeth. Feet, pant legs, bath robe hems – they’re all fair game! I suggest to clients that they make several of their own “latch ropes” and keep them handy, all over the house. That way, when they walk from the living room to the kitchen, they can grab the closest latch rope and drag it behind them as they move. Puppy is more likely to latch onto that than to moving human feet. This is especially useful for kids who may feel terrorized by their new friend each time they walk or run through the house.



Keep a “latch rope” in any room the puppy has access to, so there is always one close at hand to offer the puppy. Better that he grab the rope than your pants leg, skirt hem, or tender flesh!

You don’t need to buy a bunch of these toys; they are easy and inexpensive to make. You can cut an old beach towel or large bath towel in half (lengthways) to make two separate toys. Tie a knot in the center, then two smaller knots on each end. Or, ask your friends and family members to donate their old pairs of jeans. Cut the pant legs off, and then cut each pant leg into several long strips of fabric that you can then braid to make a denim rope. All of these homemade toys can easily be tossed into the washer when needed.

3. Redirect your pup to a “legal” object to bite. Simply petting your puppy can sometimes prove difficult. He may view your hands on him as an invitation to play – and that means using his teeth! Scrambling to save your fingers from a chomping puppy mouth can look like the legendary Buster Keaton “sticky fingers” comedy routine – as soon as you free one hand, the puppy has latched on to the other! Try holding a chew toy for your puppy to gnaw on while your other hand gently strokes him. When done correctly, this is an excellent bonding experience.

4. Toss his treats on the floor. Delivering a treat to a bitey puppy during training requires some skill. Avoid pinching the treat between your thumb and index finger, or your puppy’s teeth may clamp down on your fingers. Instead, offer the treat in the palm of your open hand, or, better yet, toss it to the floor.

There’s an extra advantage to tossing treats directly on the floor: Your puppy will learn to anticipate that good stuff is delivered on the ground, and not necessarily from the hand. This will help curb his interest in human hands, and will result in less jumping up to bite them. It is especially helpful in keeping children’s tiny hands safe.

Avoid Saying "No!"

Shouting once or twice might work by startling your puppy at first, but soon he'll learn to ignore it. Sometimes, shouting or shrieking can actually cause the puppy to become more excited. It's perfectly normal for us to involuntarily respond to a sharp puppy bite by letting out a few choice words, but it is certainly not an effective training plan. Instead, quickly refer to one of the suggestions above.

Be Prepared for Puppy Teeth

By far the best plan of action for dealing with puppy biting involves being well-prepared. Manage your puppy's environment by storing anything you don't want him to chew, including plants, wires, and anything else within his reach. Have lots and lots of appropriate objects available for your puppy to wrap his teeth around, and remember to praise him every time he puts the right item in his mouth. Be patient; this shall pass!

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You can make several latch ropes from a single pair of torn or worn-out jeans. Cut the legs off, cut the legs into strips, then braid and knot the ends.

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- [Puppy Training & Nutrition \(/topics/puppy_training_nutrition.html\)](/topics/puppy_training_nutrition.html)
- [Chewing \(/topics/chewing.html\)](/topics/chewing.html)
- [Greeting \(/topics/greeting.html\)](/topics/greeting.html)
- [Positive Training Basics \(/topics/positive_training_basics.html\)](/topics/positive_training_basics.html)

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I too have had a lot of luck using the "yelp" method. When you do it, they pull back and look at you surprised. Then they usually try it again to see if you give the same response, but within minutes the chomping is not quite as hard as it was in the beginning. I've even had some luck with older dogs that didn't learn proper bite inhibition as puppies.

Posted by: Stephenie D | May 1, 2017 11:55 AM

When my GSD Gracie arrived at 9 wks old, her breeder warned me about these pups being "little alligators" and she wasn't kidding! No matter how many toys I used, Gracie's playing/mouthing would leave little holes and skin tears on both my forearms. I think her teething got into the mix as well.

I'd finally had enough. Solution? BIG CARROTS! Advice from Gracie's breeder. Gracie would furiously chew them up, leaving piles of carrot crumbs. Chomping up the carrots seemed to ease her excitement level off and give her jaws/teeth a workout. Great toothbrushes too!

Posted by: LoveGSDs | April 30, 2017 7:53 PM

The squeal mentioned by rxjim is a very effective tool! In fact, when my daughter took her Lab puppy to puppy school, the first thing the instructor taught the class was "the mama-dog yelp" (without the puppies around). It is almost magic for deterring nearly any kind of bad behavior.

Posted by: Marjieoc | April 30, 2017 2:31 PM

I am very skeptical about making latch ropes from ANY material found in the home, such as towels or blue jeans. I once adopted an adult golden retriever who arrived with a "tug toy" that was an old tube sock knotted in the middle.

I was able to teach him not to chew on shoes and other "not-a-puppy-toys"--except for knit fabrics. Apparently having a knit chew toy (the sock) meant in his mind that knits were permissible and fair game.

I suspect any toy made from towels or blue jeans would endanger all terrycloth or denim in the house for a long, long time!

Posted by: Marjieoc | April 30, 2017 1:04 PM

I love the latch rope idea!

Posted by: RRmom | April 30, 2017 10:38 AM

Ms. Tucker. You might have mentioned "squealing" in the article. A puppy that has been part of a litter (and that would be the best kind of puppy to choose) has learned that when he bites a litter mate, it squeals then the playing ends. A human female, high pitched squeal would be best. But after a brief "yelp" and ending the activity for a short time before going back would be exactly what happens when the play gets too rough among litter mates. And as most folks know, body language is important, so an exaggerated withdrawal at the same time is helpful. This has worked for me, even with a "teenage" dog- or an older one that simply mouths

Posted by: rxjim@aol.com | April 30, 2017 9:42 AM