



Support for adopters

GUIDANCE FOR NEW DOG OWNERS

Understanding mouthing and play-biting behaviour

A puppy will want to investigate his/her owners' clothing, fingers or hair using its mouth and, to begin with, many owners will find this cute. However, there will come a time when their needle-like teeth will become painful, causing bruising and in severe cases breaking the skin, and the behaviour will become harder to change. This is a particular problem in hand reared puppies that have not had their mother/siblings to learn bite inhibition from.

What is mouthing/play-biting?

- Mouthing and play-biting is a common behaviour that naturally occurs in puppies. It is an important developmental behaviour because they use their mouths to interact and investigate the world
- Play bites are part of exaggerated play and are a normal dog-to-dog interaction. Puppies usually learn the rules of play with other puppies and dogs; they learn that the play stops if they bite their playmates too hard and this teaches them to bite with a soft mouth. Sometimes dogs and puppies direct excited play-biting towards their owners/carers.
- Puppies also find chewing hard objects useful in relieving the discomfort of teething and chew toys should always be available during this time. Dogs also find chewing enriching and should always be provided with safe, suitable objects to chew for this reason too.

Quite often, mouthing and play-biting behaviour is mistaken for aggression, particularly in adult dogs, so it is very important that other behaviour signs are taken into account. A dog that is just displaying mouthing behaviour will usually have a more relaxed body posture than an aggressive dog. Mouthing will often occur when the dog is excitable; for example, when the dog is expecting to play. In many cases, the dog may start jumping up and will begin to grab at arms and sleeves of clothes. Sometimes they may even manage to grab hold of a sleeve and try to engage in a game of tug-of-war. In these situations, the dog may accidentally grab too hard, which may cause bruising or broken skin.

Modifying inappropriate mouthing/play biting behaviour

Below are a few tips for managing mouthing/play biting behaviour but if you have any concerns or need support then please speak to the RSPCA you adopted your dog from.

- Mouthing and play-biting should always be redirected onto a suitable toy. Make sure you always have a toy in your hand when playing with a puppy or any dog who tends to mouth or play bite. If your puppy or dog makes contact with your hands or any part of your body or clothing keep that part of your body still and distract them at once by offering a toy instead. Keep the toy interesting by moving it around, wiggling it or rolling it along the ground; the aim is to teach them that toys are more fun than your hands or clothing.

- It is very important that the dog does not think that mouthing/play biting is a game. Don't smile or laugh when a puppy or dog displays this behaviour as he/she may think that this is what you want him/her to do.
- Be very consistent in training. This will help your dog learn more quickly.
- Never play rough and tumble games without toys with dogs displaying this behaviour as this may encourage them to play using your clothing or body parts! Always use a toy for games.

Adopting an RSPCA dog

The RSPCA takes in dogs that have often not had the correct start in life and have missed much, if not all, the socialisation and training that they require as a puppy. This means that many young dogs in RSPCA care have already developed and learnt to mouth their handler. Dogs that display these behaviours are often put onto behaviour modification programs so that the dog is retrained not to mouth.

When adopting a dog that has a history of mouthing behaviour whilst in our care, a member of staff/volunteer will demonstrate and explain that dog's behaviour modification program with you prior to rehoming and discuss any concerns that you may have. Staff/volunteers may even ask you to demonstrate the program to them so that they feel confident that you will be able to handle the dog when you take him/her home.

Post-adoption support

Dogs that have been rehomed on behaviour modification plans should be monitored via regular telephone calls after they have gone home. These may start weekly and, as the behaviour improves, become less frequent. You will be advised at the point of adoption as to how frequent this contact will be. Please be reassured that these calls are to offer support and to check that training is going well and the behaviour is improving. They are also a great opportunity for you to run over any concerns that you may have.

Aggression in dogs

If it is suspected that a dog is showing signs of aggression rather than mouthing or play biting then a full behaviour assessment must be carried out by a dog behaviour expert, who will then be able to advise the best course of action.

It is important that the behaviour expert used is someone with the appropriate knowledge, skills and experience to treat the dog, with the correct up-to-date knowledge and the necessary skills required to treat pets with behaviour problems. Inappropriate or outdated advice or methods may adversely affect the dog's welfare and even make a dog's behaviour worse.

The Association for the Study of Animal Behaviour (ASAB) accredits Certified Clinical Animal Behaviourists (CCAB), who possess the appropriate skills, knowledge and abilities. The Association of Pet Behaviour Counsellors (APBC) also represents animal behaviourists. For more information, visit www.rspca.org.uk/findabehaviourist

We would like to thank you for adopting a dog from the RSPCA. We hope you have many happy years together and our centres/branches are always grateful to hear how the animals are doing in their new home.