

# Oklahoma City Animal Welfare



## Puppy Behavior Chewing and Nipping

### Whoever thought that raising a child

is the toughest thing to do may not have raised a puppy. After all, at least babies can wear diapers! Much like infants and toddlers, though, puppies explore their world by putting things in their mouths. Puppies are teething until they're about six months old, which usually creates some discomfort. Chewing not only facilitates teething, but also makes sore gums feel better.

Puppies may chew on furniture, shoes, shrubbery, and other objects. These are normal puppy behaviors, but they can still create problems for you. Unfortunately, unlike children, puppies won't magically "outgrow" these behaviors as they mature. Instead, you must shape your puppy's behaviors and teach him which ones are acceptable and which aren't.

### Discouraging Unacceptable Behaviors

It's virtually inevitable that your puppy will, at some point, chew up something you value. This is part of raising a puppy! You can, however, prevent most problems by taking the following precautions.

Minimize chewing problems by puppy-proofing your house. Put the trash out of reach—inside a cabinet or outside on the porch—or buy containers with locking lids. Encourage children to pick up their toys and don't leave socks, shoes, eyeglasses, briefcases, or TV remote controls lying around within your puppy's reach.

If, and only if, you catch your puppy chewing on something he shouldn't, interrupt the behavior with a loud noise, then offer him an acceptable chew toy instead. Praise him lavishly when he takes the toy in his mouth.

Make unacceptable chew items unpleasant to your puppy. Furniture and other items can be coated with a taste deterrent (such as Bitter Apple®) to make

them unappealing. (See "Using Aversives to Modify Your Dog's Behavior.")

Don't give your puppy objects to play with—such as old socks, old shoes, or old children's toys—that closely resemble items that are off-limits. Puppies can't tell the difference.

Closely supervise your puppy. Don't give him the chance to go off by himself and get into trouble.

Use baby gates, close doors, or tether him to you with a six-foot leash so that you can keep an eye on him.

When you must be gone from your home or you can't actively supervise your puppy, confine him to a small, safe area such as a laundry room. You might also consider crate training your puppy. (See "Crate Training Your Dog.") Puppies under six months of age shouldn't be crated for longer than three or four hours at a time because they may not be able to control their bladders and bowels longer than that.

Make sure your puppy is getting adequate physical activity. Puppies (and dogs) left alone in a yard don't play by themselves. Take your puppy for walks or play a game of fetch with him for both mental and physical exercise.

Give your puppy plenty of "people time." He can only learn the rules of your home when he's with you.

### Encouraging Acceptable Behavior

Provide your puppy with lots of appropriate toys. (See "Dog Toys and How to Use Them.")

Rotate your puppy's toys. Puppies are often more interested in unfamiliar or novel objects. Put out a few for several days, then pick those up and put out different ones.

Experiment with different kinds of toys. When you introduce a new toy to your puppy, watch him to make sure he won't tear it up and ingest the pieces.

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Consider the various types of toys that can be stuffed with food. Putting tidbits of food inside chew toys focuses your puppy's chewing activities on those toys instead of on unacceptable objects.

If your puppy is teething, try freezing a wet washcloth for him to chew on.

### Other Reasons for Destructive Behavior

In most cases, destructive chewing by puppies is nothing more than normal puppy behavior. Occasionally, however, puppies—like adult dogs—can exhibit destructive behaviors for specific reasons. Examples include separation anxiety, fear-related behaviors, and attention-getting behaviors. For help with these problems, contact a professional animal behaviorist.

### What Not to Do

Never discipline or punish your puppy after the fact. If you discover a chewed item even minutes after he's chewed it, you're too late. Animals associate correction with what they're doing at the time they're being corrected. A puppy can't reason that, "I tore up those shoes an hour ago and that's why I'm being scolded now." Some people believe this is what a puppy is thinking because he runs and hides or because he "looks guilty."

In reality, "guilty looks" are actually canine submissive postures that dogs show when they're threatened. When you're angry and upset, your puppy feels threatened by your tone of voice, body postures, and facial expressions, so he may hide or show submissive postures. Punishment after the fact will not only fail to eliminate the undesirable behavior, but could provoke other undesirable behaviors as well.

A puppy has a lot to learn in his new home. Be patient and consistent when training your new

puppy and you'll share a special bond for years to come.

### Encourage Acceptable Behavior

Redirect your puppy's penchant for nipping and biting by offering her more acceptable objects (such as chew toys) whenever you pet her. This technique can be especially effective when children want to pet her. As you or the child reaches out to scratch her behind the ears with one hand, offer the chew toy with the other. This will not only help your puppy learn that people and petting are wonderful, but will also keep her mouth busy while she's being petted. Alternate which hand does the petting and which one has the chew toy. You may need to start off by petting or scratching your puppy for short periods of time, since the longer she's petted, the more likely she is to get excited and start to nip.

### Discourage Unacceptable Behavior

You must also teach your puppy to be gentle with hands and show her that nipping results in unpleasant consequences. Teach your puppy that nipping "turns off" any attention and social interaction with you. As soon as a nip occurs, look your puppy right in the eye and yell "OUCH" as though you've been mortally wounded. Then ignore her.

Leave the room if you must, but ignore her until she's calm, and then try the chew toy and petting method again.

### Jumping Up

When your puppy jumps up on you, she wants attention. Even if you push her away, she is still getting attention (even if it is a response that you might consider negative).

When Your Puppy Jumps Up:

Fold your arms in front of you, turn away from her, and say "off."

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Continue to turn away from her until all four paws are on the ground, then quietly praise her and give her a treat. If she knows the “sit” command, give the command when all four paws are on the ground, then quietly praise her and give her a treat while she’s in the sitting position.

If she begins to jump while you’re praising her, simply turn away and repeat the second step, above. Remember to keep your praise low-key.

When your puppy realizes that she gets no attention from you while she’s jumping up, but does get attention when she sits, she’ll stop jumping up. Remember, once you’ve taught her to come and sit quietly for attention, you must reward her behavior. Be careful not to ignore her when she comes and sits politely, waiting for your attention.

### What Not to Do

Attempts to tap, slap, or hit your puppy in the face for nipping or jumping up are almost guaranteed to backfire. Several things may happen, depending on your puppy’s temperament and the severity of the correction:

She could become “hand-shy” and cringe or cower whenever a hand comes toward her face.

She could become afraid of you and refuse to come to you or approach you at all.

She could respond in a defensive manner and attempt to bite you to defend herself.

She could interpret a mild slap as an invitation to play, causing her to become more excited and even more likely to nip.

Never play “tug-of-war” or wrestling games with your puppy if you’re having a nipping problem. These types of games encourage out-of-control behavior, grabbing, lunging, and competition with you—behaviors you don’t want her to learn.

### Be Consistent

It’s important that all behaviors, acceptable and unacceptable, be managed consistently by all family members. And remember that any method you try will probably not be effective unless you work hard to teach your puppy an acceptable alternative behavior.

### A Note about Children and Puppies

It’s very difficult for children under eight or nine years old to practice the kind of behavior modification outlined here.

Children’s first reaction to being nipped or mouthed by a puppy is to push the puppy away with their hands and arms. This will be interpreted by the puppy as play and will probably cause the puppy to nip and mouth even more. Adults should closely monitor all interactions between their children and dogs.

Puppies are usually weaned at six to seven weeks, but are still learning important skills as their mother gradually leaves them for longer periods of time. Ideally, puppies should stay with their littermates (or other “role-model” dogs) for at least 12 weeks.

Puppies separated from their littermates too early often fail to develop appropriate social skills, such as learning how to send and receive signals, what an “inhibited bite” (acceptable mouthing pressure) means, how far to go in play-wrestling, and so forth. Play is important for puppies because it increases their physical coordination, social skills, and learning limits. By interacting with their mother and littermates, puppies explore the ranking process (who’s in charge) and also learn how to be a dog.

Skills not acquired during the first eight weeks may be lost forever. While these stages are important and fairly consistent, a dog’s mind remains receptive to new experiences and lessons well beyond

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puppyhood. Most dogs are still puppies, in mind and body, through the first two years of life.

### Stages of Puppy Development:

#### 0–2 Weeks: Neonatal Period

Puppy is most influenced by his mother.

Senses of touch and taste are present at birth.

#### 2–4 Weeks: Transitional Period

Puppy is most influenced by his mother and littermates.

Eyes open, teeth begin to come in, and senses of hearing and smell develop.

Puppy begins to stand, walk a little, wag tail, and bark.

By the fourth or fifth week, eyesight is well-developed.

#### 3–12 Weeks: Socialization Period

During this period, puppy needs opportunities to meet other dogs and people.

By three to five weeks, puppy becomes aware of his surroundings, companions (both canine and human), and relationships, including play.

By four to six weeks, puppy is most influenced by littermates and is learning about being a dog.

From four to 12 weeks, puppy remains influenced by littermates and is also influenced by people. Puppy learns to play, develops social skills, learns the inhibited bite, explores social structure/ranking, and improves physical coordination.

By five to seven weeks, puppy develops curiosity and explores new experiences. Puppy needs positive “people” experiences during this time.

By seven to nine weeks, puppy is refining his physical skills and coordination, and can begin to be housetrained. Puppy has full use of senses.

By eight to 10 weeks, puppy experiences real fear involving normal objects and experiences; puppy needs positive training during this time.

By nine to 12 weeks, puppy is refining reactions, developing social skills with littermates (appropriate interactions), and exploring the environment and objects.

Puppy begins to focus on people; this is a good time to begin formal training.

#### 3–6 Months: Ranking Period

Puppy is most influenced by “playmates,” which may now include those of other species.

Puppy begins to see and use ranking (dominance and submission) within the household (the puppy’s “pack”), including humans.

Puppy begins teething (and associated chewing).

At four months of age, puppy experiences another fear stage.

#### 6–18 Months: Adolescence

Puppy is most influenced by human and dog “pack” members.

At seven to nine months, puppy goes through a second chewing phase, part of exploring territory.

Puppy increases exploration of dominance, including challenging humans.

If not spayed or neutered, puppy experiences beginnings of sexual behavior. (Spaying or neutering your puppy at an early age will likely increase the health benefits of the surgery and increase his lifespan.)

