

# OUCH!

## Teaching deaf puppies to use their mouths gently

©Debbie Bauer 2015

Dogs use their mouths in many ways – when they eat, chew, play, discipline, bark, and too many more ways to list. Dogs can cause injury to humans if they are not taught to use their mouths gently and to be respectful of human skin. This means it is our responsibility to teach our dogs the behaviors that we like. We cannot expect our dogs to stop using their mouths because it is a normal dog behavior. Just like when we use our hands. But just like we must learn to use our hands gently and appropriately in life, so must our puppies learn to use their mouths gently and appropriately.

Because there is a myth that deaf dogs are more likely to bite than hearing dogs, it is of utmost importance that we, as advocates for deaf dogs, make sure our dogs know how to be gentle and respectful with their mouths. It's important that we can show others by example that deaf dogs can be safe and wonderful companions, so that more homeless deaf dogs can get adopted.

Sometimes a dog that is deaf may have a harder time learning to be gentle with its mouth than a dog that can hear. Let me explain. These lessons begin when a dog is still a baby puppy with its mother and littermates. When one puppy bites another too hard, the one that is being bitten will yelp sharply. This often startles the first puppy into letting go. That puppy learns that in order to continue playing with the other puppies, it needs to control the strength of its mouth. Since puppies play with their mouths, they learn to grip each other with less and less pressure.

When a puppy enters a human household, it needs to also learn to control its mouth with its new human family. Human skin is even more fragile than dog skin and is usually not covered with fur as protection, so the puppy needs to learn to be even more careful with us than with other dogs. Our natural reaction when something hurts is to blurt out, "Ouch!" This will often stop the puppy. Some puppies are more persistent than others and continue to bite too hard, but many will learn to play more gently to keep the game going. Obviously, deaf puppies cannot hear the other puppies yelp, or hear us say, "Ouch!" They may need some extra guidance learning to be gentle.

One way of letting your puppy know that its play is getting a bit rough is to stop playing every time it bites you too hard. When it bites down too hard, immediately remove yourself from its reach. Remove the body part from the puppy's mouth gently but matter-of-factly and stand up so the puppy cannot reach you. Exaggerate your body movement and facial expressions to convey your disappointment. The attitude of your body and face should be saying, "Ouch! Stop that!" The puppy will recognize the sudden difference in your demeanor. You should also say the word "Ouch!" out loud. Yes, I know the puppy is deaf, but saying the words will add to the genuine picture of how your body and face look. It's important to note here that you should not allow yourself to get angry. Remember that your puppy is just acting like any normal puppy would act while playing or while excited. It is not doing anything wrong; it just needs to learn how you would like to be treated during playtime.

This break doesn't need to be long. Once your puppy calms down, even for a moment, give the good dog signal and slowly and calmly return to its level. Allow your body and face to soften back to normal and begin to interact again but more gently and calmly. You must be consistent and end the interaction

every time that your puppy bites too hard or plays too roughly. This is how it will learn. With consistency, you may find that just changing your facial expression and withdrawing your hand for a moment is enough of a reminder for the puppy to be gentle.

Sometimes puppies can't seem to stop themselves from grabbing everything around them in their mouths. This usually means that the puppy has gotten over-stimulated and needs help to calm down. Giving the puppy some quiet time to calm down is a good idea. It might be a good time to give a special stuffed food toy to occupy puppy's mouth and encourage calmness. Be sure to praise your puppy frequently when it is interacting appropriately with you.

In teaching our dogs to be gentle with us, it is important for us to also be gentle with our dogs. Playing games that mimic wrestling or slapping of a puppy will encourage it to play more roughly with us. While it may seem cute now with a little tiny puppy, think about that bigger adult dog with much bigger teeth. Will you still want the dog playing with you that roughly? If you have children, it's especially important for you to model calm and gentle ways for the children and puppy to play together. Show your older children how to appropriately handle the situation if puppy gets too rough. Always supervise and be ready to step in during playtime.

Keep lots of safe toys and chews around to help redirect your puppy from mouthing things you don't want it to. Chewing on toys can keep a puppy's mouth busy and help it learn appropriate behaviors. When your puppy is mouthing too much or too hard, offer it a toy to chew on instead. Often that will be enough to divert its attention.

A dog that knows to be gentle with its mouth is likely to be welcomed into so many more of the family's activities than one that doesn't. By taking some time early in your puppy's life to teach gentleness, you can set it up for a lifetime of success.

***Debbie Bauer** is a certified Healing Touch for Animals® practitioner, a certified Tellington TTouch® practitioner, a published author, and a professional dog trainer. She has over 28 years of training and consulting experience working with dogs and their people. She specializes in working with dogs that display fearful, reactive and aggressive behaviors, in a positive manner. Debbie has trained dogs in a variety of fields including therapy and assistance dogs, print ad and media work, obedience, agility, and scent work. One of her passions is working with and educating about deaf, blind, and blind/deaf dogs.*