

### Is it normal for my lab to be this mouthy?

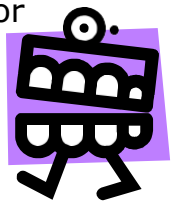


Anyone who has done their research on the Labrador retriever will know that these are dogs that love to have things in their mouths. It's what they were bred to do and most of them do it very well. However, it is important that we as humans teach our Labs what is appropriate to put their mouths on and what isn't. This includes humans and their body parts!

Puppies of all breeds need to nip, mouth, and chew. It is part of their normal development. If you have ever had the chance to watch puppies play together, you see that they use their mouths a lot. Puppies explore their world with their mouths. It is how they learn many of their lessons on how to get along in the world. A puppy's littermates are some of her best teachers for learning what is appropriate mouthing and what is not. Since humans have domesticated the dog and as a result, separate our puppies from the litter at about eight weeks of age, much of this teaching falls on us.

There is a very good reason why most good breeders and rescue organizations would never allow a puppy to leave the litter before it is eight weeks old. While the puppies are all weaned and physically capable of getting along on their own, they need those extra couple of weeks to learn socialization which is vitally important, especially since we plan on bringing these puppies into our homes and lives. Studies show that single puppy litters and puppies who leave the litter before they are eight weeks old often have problems dealing with other dogs and humans, especially when it comes to using their mouths appropriately.

However, if you are reading this article chances are that you already have a dog and are trying to figure out how to get her to stop biting you at every turn. If you are reading this article as part of research for bringing a dog into your home, that is wonderful and there are extra points being counted for you somewhere. I wish that I had been as smart as you are before I brought my "walking mouth" home four years ago! My dog, brought home at the age of seven weeks, had a terrible, horrible mouthing problem until he was almost fifteen months old. This is extreme, even in lab puppies. I think I tried everything under the sun to get this dog to stop using me as a chew toy, which gives me the ability to share my successes and failures with others.



The first thing that everyone is told to do when their puppy bites them too hard is to yipe like a puppy in pain. This is a specific sound, pulled quickly and loudly from the diaphragm. It is sharp and high pitched. (Adults should yipe for children, since children tend to sound more like wounded prey to a puppy than another puppy.) All play stops when you are forced to yipe and can resume when the puppy wishes to engage in correct play, either with you or a chew toy that you offer. At first you would only yipe for the hardest 10% of the bites. The next week you yipe for the hardest 20%, then the hardest 30% and so on and so forth until your puppy only puts her teeth on you in a very soft and playful way.

The above technique works for many dogs, especially dogs that are softer and more sensitive. Many labs do not fit in the "softer and more sensitive" category. I received all sorts of advice for how to teach my puppy, who had the sensitivity of a rock, how to stop mouthing me. I was desperate for advice since he would mouth me in play hard enough to draw blood several times a week.

Many people, from the breeder, to the trainer, to well-meaning people at the dog park, had advice for me and I tried it all. I attempted to catch my puppy's lip between his tooth and my arm so he'd bite himself instead of me. I shoved my hand down his throat when he bit me and also tried to hold his mouth shut while scolding him. Those techniques were not effective in the least, nor were popping him under the chin, grabbing him by the scruff of the neck and shaking him, or putting him on his back in an alpha roll. In fact, it seemed that the more I tried these things, the harder the puppy would come back at me. Fighting this dog physically was not only ineffective, but it got him more excited. The suggestions I was getting became more and more violent and I simply was not prepared or willing to carry out that kind of "training".

Finally I read a book called *The Dog Whisperer* by Paul Owens. In this book he describes what he calls "the magnet game". You tether the dog to an immovable object and play with her as you normally would. The instant the teeth make contact with you, you stand up and walk out of the puppy's reach, turning your back on her. Completely ignore her attempts to re-engage you in play (unless she's doing something unsafe) until she settles down. Once she is settled, resume playing with her. If her teeth come out again, you walk away again. Her good behavior is like a magnet, drawing you into her space. Her bad behavior repels you away from her. Since puppies are mouthing as a part of play and for attention, this game quickly teaches them that biting too hard will not get them what they want. Within a few weeks of doing this with my dog, he

stopped mouthing me. It was wonderful. I actually enjoyed playing with my dog for the first time in a year!

There are a few other things that you can do in conjunction with the other methods I've recommended. First of all make sure that your puppy always has something appropriate to put in her mouth. (See the article on chew toys for ideas.) Also make sure that the puppy is getting enough exercise. Puppies with extra energy tend to use their mouths more. Another thing to try would be changing the dog's food. There are dogs who have sensitivities to various chemicals used to process dog foods (my dog is one of them), and the dog foods you can buy in the grocery store contain these chemicals. True premium foods list named meat and whole grains as the first ten or so ingredients. You should easily be able to pronounce and hopefully identify where the rest of the ingredients on the label come from.

Above all, remember patience when working with a puppy that nips, mouths, or bites. This is one of the hardest things to do - I know, I've been there. Responding to the dog's bites with your own aggression, no matter how well-meaning, can serve to make your dog reluctant to play with you (in the pup's eyes you have become dangerous and unpredictable) and not teach her how to play properly at all. It can also be much more difficult to teach your dog to hunt, play fetch, or retrieve a dumbbell in obedience if she is reluctant to have anything in her mouth. If you cannot deal with your puppy being a puppy with all of her mouthiness, put her in a crate or puppy-safe room for 10-15 minutes or so, not as a punishment, but as a way for both of you to calm down. Try to keep in mind that this is a phase that shall pass, as long as you are willing to be kind, firm, and consistent.



Cousteau, aka "The Walking Mouth"

Cousteau now prefers chewing on tennis balls, rather than the author's hand, much to the author's eternal joy.