

## **Mouthy Behavior in GSDs**

Steve has reported a female GSD that insists on mouthing everything in sight including its owners.

Much has been written on dealing with this problem but I think many of these suggestions are short term solutions, that don't address the fundamental behavioral problem. What is an adult or adolescent GSD doing while mouthing? I believe the dog is trying to communicate the need for pack affiliation. There is a different quality to this activity than to mindless whining or constant activity that is not addressed toward a person. So, from the dog's point of view, what does she need or want? We know from Steve's observations that she is otherwise needy of human contact and we know that she has been recently stressed and has lost her usual environment and schedule. In what circumstances are canines mouthy toward each other? Puppies lick and mouth at their mother for food and protection. Young dogs will greet each other with leaping and mouthy behavior. Pack members will greet each other by grabbing each others muzzles and legs gently. These greetings have hierarchy information as well.

Developmental stage of gaining pack position:

Many people who are very experienced with dogs in small groups may not have had the experience of watching puppies become adolescents and fit into a pack situation with several adults. The transition between puppy immunity and a fully functioning pack member involves a lot of mouthing from the youngster toward the dominant and sub-dominant adults. The behavior starts with an extension of begging behavior that the puppy uses with mom to get lunch, extends with age to purposeful play and pushiness. The youngster is asking for interaction with adult pack members so they will define the puppy's position within the pack by moving aside or by dominance displays. The key concept is that this is a normal developmental stage and that when the puppy's needs for affiliation are met the behavior declines in frequency. Not that the adolescents are not still rowdy and physical within the pack structure, but they are not usually frantic unless the pack structure radically changes.

What has happened to this youngster? Her former pack has been destroyed at the developmental moment when she was gaining a place. If a behavior set is frustrated, it often increases in intensity and the signals she would be receiving from pack members which would alter and calm the behavior are not present. Partly this is a 'cultural' problem. The signals we give as humans are not as efficient as those given by other dogs.

What is the response to her behavior that will end the mouthing?

The long term solution is to give her a place within the family through proper dominance setups, by giving her a job to do which she is responsible for, and

by lowering her general frustration level with lots of exercise and play. She also needs mental stimulation especially in a role in which she needs to please a person. One of the methods that can be useful is to put the puppy in a slightly uncomfortable position so that she turns to her person for reassurance. Establishing trust is a very important part of this training. If the mouthiness itself is discouraged without a solution to the basic problem, the frustration will emerge in even less acceptable behavior like destructiveness and separation anxiety. This kind of long term work will also allow her to relax concerning the general neediness that Steve has described. In the short term, invest in leather gloves. (NO, of course, I am kidding, that would be the worst possible choice and does not teach bite inhibition). I prefer not to use 'ouch' with adolescents, it works for bite inhibition at an earlier developmental stage (puppies 12 weeks and younger), but it sends a message of submission to the older puppy. I prefer to assert my pack position as leader rather than as playmate by grabbing the muzzle and growling, and by using body language (looming and eye pressure) which gets a submissive response. Then-very important-I want to confirm the puppies place by getting her to do something to please me so I can congratulate her on her place in the pack. This is not just praise, it is congratulating a team member. The frantic mouthing indicates the intensity of the youngster's need to be part of a family. Disengaging while the puppy is frantic is also not the best response, in my opinion, although it can be a very useful technique when the puppy has more confidence.

Hope this helps.

From Lynne Crosby [lcrosby@slipnet.com](mailto:lcrosby@slipnet.com)

SFBA German Shepherd Rescue volunteer