

# Mouthing and Biting Behaviors in Puppies

## WHY IS MY PUPPY NIPPING AND BITING?

Although often thought to be a teething behavior, nipping, mouthing and biting in young dogs is generally a form of social play. Teething is more likely to involve gnawing or chewing on household objects. The first thing you must do is provide ample opportunity for play, without biting. Social play with people could involve retrieve games (ball, Frisbee or soft toy), hide n' seek (with the puppy finding the humans for a treat), chasing after soap bubbles, as well as walks, swimming or learning tricks. Although wrestling and tug of war games can be fun, they may lead to play that is too rough or rambunctious.

Puppies need to learn bite inhibition. This is something they start to learn while with their littermates. It is one reason that puppies should not go to new homes until they are 7-8 weeks old and have had time to practice social skills with other dogs. It can therefore be extremely beneficial for the puppy to have regular interactive social play periods with other dogs or puppies in the home or in the neighborhood.

## HOW CAN I STOP PLAY BITING?

Provided the dog is receiving adequate play, attention, and exercise, you can turn the training to bite inhibition. One of the things that he needs to learn is how much pressure from his jaw causes pain. Without this feedback, a puppy does not learn to inhibit the force of its bite. Because **all** dogs can and will bite at some time, this lesson is vital for human safety.

How is this lesson taught? When puppies play with each other, if puppy A bites on puppy B too hard, puppy B will yelp. If that does not work, puppy B will leave. This sends the message to puppy A that its' bites were too hard and if it wishes to continue to play, it needs to be gentle. However, people often do not send this message to their puppy. In the beginning, they often allow the puppy to chew on them without reprimands and the puppy assumes that the behavior is acceptable.

Instead, the message people should send is that all mouthing and chewing on hands is painful. To do this, often all that is necessary is for all family members to emit a sharp "yip" and cease all play and attention **immediately**. This sends the message to the puppy that the bites are painful and that biting will cause play to be terminated. When consistently administered this will often stop playful biting. This training often works for those family members who are a little more forceful and assertive and who are immediate and consistent in their training. If the puppy persists, chases or immediately repeats the behavior, closing a door or walking over a baby gate to leave the puppy behind, can help to teach the puppy that nipping leads to immediate inattention and isolation.

In turn, it is very important to praise the puppy for soft gentle play or licking your hands instead of biting. This is the true key to teaching the puppy what is socially acceptable and play behavior with humans.



It is important that if you have young children in your family (12 years and under) that all interaction, including games, be supervised 100% of the time. Children should simply NEVER be left alone with a dog, no matter how well behaved. Please read our accompanying handout on dogs and kids for more detailed information.

### WHAT IF YELPING DOES NOT HELP?

Other techniques are often suggested for play biting. Some involve harsh discipline, like slapping the puppy under the chin or forcefully holding the mouth closed. Remember, pain can increase aggression and cause the puppy to become anxious, fearful or perhaps more excited. These techniques also require that you grab an excited puppy; not an easy thing to do. Some puppies may even misinterpret the owner's attempts at punishment as rough play, which in turn might lead to an increase in the behavior. Physical methods are therefore not recommended. Owners who cannot inhibit the puppy with a yelp should use time-outs or a head halter.

The use of a head halter with a remote leash attached allows the puppy to play and chew, but a gentle pull on the leash can immediately and successfully close the mouth and stop biting without any physical force. By simultaneously saying "OFF", most puppies will quickly learn the meaning of the command. As soon as the puppy stops and calms down, the owner can allow play to resume, as long as biting does not begin again.

Remember that play biting is a component of play behavior in puppies. Play is a form of social interaction. Realize that your puppy is trying to play with you even though the behavior is rough. To ensure that you are in control, be certain that each play session is initiated by you and not the puppy, and that you can end each session whenever you choose. One effective strategy when the play gets too rough is to immediately end the play session and leave. Social withdrawal can be a very powerful tool. Leave the puppy alone long enough to calm down (30 seconds to two minutes). If upon your return the wild playing begins again, leave again. Keep repeating until the puppy figures out that when he gets wild or bites, you immediately leave the room. Although it is tempting to pick the puppy up and take it out of the room, this interaction may be interpreted by

your puppy as additional play and the biting may continue as you carry the puppy to a confinement location.

An easy way to achieve social isolation is to simply leave a lightweight leash (a 6' cat leash works well) on the puppy and as soon as the biting begins, drape the handle of the leash over a doorknob and leave the area. Or you can quickly tie the leash to a solid piece of furniture and leave the area. Or simply leave the room and shut the door behind you so the puppy can't follow you. Again, keep the "time-outs" for short time periods; 30 seconds to two minutes and repeat if necessary until the puppy is calm.

Owners who cannot inhibit the puppy with yelping or time-outs could consider an electronic alarm, air horn, squirt bottle or ultrasonic device, as soon as the biting becomes excessive. Use the device as **discreetly** as possible and immediately **after** yelping first. Praise the puppy as soon as he lets go. Repeat as needed but remember to keep your extra "tool" like the squirt bottle or air horn hidden until needed, and then hide it again immediately after its use. Do not leave it out or threaten the puppy with its use. Use it and then hide it. Children should NOT be allowed to use these devices but they should be supervised by an adult who can use these devices as discreetly as possible.

### I HAVE HEARD THAT SOME GAMES LEAD TO EXCITABLE, ROUGH BEHAVIOR. WHICH GAMES SHOULD I AVOID?

Games such as tug-of-war, chase (with you chasing the puppy), wrestling, and playing ANY games with your hands **does encourage** the puppy to bite and act aggressively towards you. Try teaching your puppy fetch, or blowing bubbles for him, or play hide n' seek (the human hides and calls the puppy to find him for a reward of a toy or a treat). Direct the puppy's mouth towards toys he CAN play with. Avoid giving your puppy household items such as shoes, towels or clothing to play with. This practice will teach the puppy it is OK to chew on things with your scent on them. Instead, buy him some sturdy dog toys such as Nylabones, Kongs or large plastic balls. For additional information on play and exercise in dogs, see our accompanying handout.

IS THERE ANYTHING ELSE I CAN DO TO  
LESSEN MOUTHING AND BITING?

Yes. Make sure your puppy gets daily exercise with appropriate toys and enroll your puppy as early as possible (no later than 12 weeks of age) in a puppy socialization and training class. Make sure the class you pick does have play time so the puppies get to interact with each other off the leash. You can also find other puppy owners and let your vaccinated pups play with each other once or twice a week. As explained above, puppies will help teach each other bite inhibition.

WHAT IF I AM STILL HAVING PROBLEMS?

If the mouthing and biting does not lessen after several weeks of consistent training as indicated above, please consult a professional, humane trainer. For referrals to humane dog trainers, please call our free Dog Training Information and Referral Helpline at (408)727-3383, ext. 759.

### **Recommended Reading**

#### **The Perfect Puppy**

Gwen Bailey, Reed International Books, 1995

#### **The Lazy Way To Train Your Dog**

Andrea Arden, Macmillan, 1998

#### **The Well Behaved Dog**

Gwen Bailey, Barrons, 1998

#### **Doctor Dunbar's Good Little Dog Book**

Ian Dunbar, James & Kenneth Publishers, 1992

#### **How To Teach A New Dog Old Tricks**

Ian Dunbar, James & Kenneth Publishers, 1991

#### **Totally Fun Things To Do With Your Dog**

By Rock (children's book), 1998

*If you have any questions, problems or concerns, please call the Humane Society Silicon Valley's FREE Animal Behavior Helpline at (408)727-3383, extension 753.*