

(18) BITING: PLAY BITING AND MOUTHING IN PUPPIES

Why is my puppy nipping and biting family members?

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 chase and retrieve games, as well as long walks or jogging. 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 7 - 8 weeks and they 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. (See our handout #28: "Play and Exercise" for additional information).

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 they need to learn is how much pressure from their jaws 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 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 that 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 and walking out of the room can help to teach the puppy that nipping leads to immediate inattention.

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 cause 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, could consider a shake can, electronic alarm, air horn, or ultrasonic device, as soon as the biting becomes excessive.

The use of a head halter with a remote leash attached allows the puppy to play and chew, but a quick pull on the leash can immediately and successfully close the mouth and stop biting without any physical force. By simultaneously saying "no biting", 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. If upon your return the wild playing begins again, leave again. 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.