

BITING - 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 to provide a regular daily routine that includes ample opportunity for play. Social play with people could involve controlled chase and retrieve games, as well as long walks or jogging. Although wrestling and tug-of-war games can be fun, for puppies that already have a problem with excessive play biting, these games may lead to play that is too rough or rambunctious. In controlled circumstances however, these games may be acceptable (see below). Puppies need to learn to inhibit the force of their bite, commonly known as 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 of age and they have had time to practice social skills with other dogs. However, even after puppies have been adopted into the new home, it can 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 'Play and exercise in dogs' for additional information).

How can I stop play biting?

Provided the dog is receiving adequate play, attention and exercise, you can turn your training to bite inhibition. One of the things that puppies 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 one puppy bites another too hard, the bitten puppy will yelp, and may also stop playing and leave. This sends the message to the puppy 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 might allow the puppy to chew and bite on them without reprimands and the puppy assumes that the behavior is acceptable. Children appear to be most vulnerable because their attempts at stopping the biting may not be properly timed or sufficiently abrupt to stop the puppy from biting. In fact a child's response is often seen by the puppy as an invitation to increase its level of chase and play. Adult supervision or a head halter for training (discussed below) should help to insure more immediate success.

The message people should send is that mouthing and chewing on hands is painful. All family members must consistently follow the rules for the puppy to understand and learn what is considered desirable behavior and what is not. However, regardless of the technique, you cannot expect the play biting to cease until you first insure that you are giving regular and sufficient opportunities for play at times when the puppy is not play biting. If the puppy begins to play bite or chew and tug on clothing, then ignoring the puppy or walking away may be sufficient. If all family members are consistent in their responses, the puppy should quickly learn that play biting actually leads to inattention rather than play. In fact, all forms of play and attention soliciting behavior should be ignored, as these can quickly escalate into more intense biting. You should be the one to schedule and initiate play sessions and not your puppy. If you teach your puppy to sit or lie quietly before each play session, you should soon have your puppy trained that these behaviors, and not play biting, will be rewarded with a play session.

If ignoring the puppy or saying “off” and walking away does not stop the biting, then you will need to work on discouraging the behavior. Begin by teaching each family member to emit a sharp ‘yip’ or ‘ouch’ as soon as biting begins so that the puppy backs off. 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. Another option is to use a sharp ‘off’ command while briefly pushing forward with the hand to back the puppy away (no hitting). Alternately, a sharp ‘off’ and quickly backing away can be effective. Most important is that the play should cease. The command ‘off’ followed by the immediate removal of play can act as a form of punishment with the word ‘off’ soon teaching the dog that if it continues to bite, play will be withdrawn. This training usually 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 shaker can, water or air spray, noise alarm, or ultrasonic device, as soon as the biting becomes excessive. The loud noise or spray is used to startle the puppy, who will likely back up and stop biting. When that happens the puppy should immediately be praised and gentle play and interactions resumed.



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. This is one of the quickest and most effective approaches to stop the biting and get immediate control of the muzzle and mouth, and is useful for owners that are not gaining sufficient verbal control.

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. Keep track of which types of play seem to get the puppy too excited and these should be avoided to help prevent biting behavior.

Can I play tug-of-war games with my puppy?



Games of tug and pull can be a good way for the puppy to expend energy while playing with family members. In this way the puppy can be given an acceptable outlet for pulling, biting and tugging rather than on the clothing or body parts of people. In addition, the tug of war game provides an opportunity to teach the puppy to give up toys on command. However, tug of war games are only acceptable if they remain under your control, or if play biting and over exuberant behavior increase. Select a few tug toys for playing this game and be certain that you are the one to start each session. It might be best to keep the toy(s) out of the puppy's reach until its time to play the

game. Throughout the play session, particularly if the puppy gets too excited or begins to grab hands or clothing, have the puppy settle down and give up the toy before allowing play to continue. Food rewards can also be used at the outset to encourage the puppy to stop the give up the toy. At the end of each tug session, teach the puppy to give up the toy and reward with a favored chew or feeding toy. If successful, this type of play provides you with a means of controlled interactive play, as well as teaching the puppy to give up the toy on command.

*This client information sheet is based on material written by Debra Horwitz, DVM, Diplomate ACVB & Gary Landsberg, DVM, Diplomate ACVB
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