

NIPPING AND MOUTHING ADVICE FOR PUPPIES AND DOGS



Puppy biting is a normal, natural and necessary behavior. The sporting breeds, such as retrievers, love to carry things in their mouths. The working and herding breeds use their mouths to control the movements of other animals. The terrier breeds are motion-activated and will chase and try to catch things that they perceive as small rodents. Understanding these tendencies, and some basic behavior principles, will help you deal effectively with the mouthing and nipping, whether your puppy is a purebred or a mixed breed pup.

Puppies engage in nipping and mouthing with each other as part of their normal development. At a very young age, puppies begin to learn how much pressure is too much from the reactions of their mothers and litter mates. When puppies play, they chomp on each other's ears and chew each other's necks until one of them bites down too hard. At that point, the bitten puppy will let out a piercing "iey, iey, ieeyyy!" (referred to as the "hurt puppy noise"), get up and walk away. This teaches the bitten puppy that when he is too rough, play ends. Since dogs are social animals, this in itself is a correction. Puppies learn bite inhibition through these playfighting sessions if they are allowed to remain with their litter until the age of 7 weeks. This is one of the most important lessons they carry into adulthood.

The full teething experience will usually last until approximately 6 months of age. During this time, mouthing is quite common. Puppies will use their mouths to investigate their environment. It gives a puppy relief to chew on all items, soft or hard, while he is teething. Providing appropriate items for your puppy to chew will help redirect the mouthing to acceptable objects. Indestructible chew toys, such as nylon bones or hard rubber toys can provide a positive outlet for the mouthing. Large rawhide bones or carrots can be frozen before offered to a teething puppy. If your pup has access to other puppies, such as a puppy kindergarten class, chances are he will be allowed to play with other puppies and continue his social lessons. Playing with adult, well socialized dogs can also be beneficial since adults are not always tolerant of puppy mouthing and can effectively correct the puppy without being too forceful. And of course, adequate physical exercise for a growing puppy is essential to controlling the mouthing, because a tired puppy is a good puppy.

First of all, avoid all physical corrections, reprimands and useless words like the generic "No!". Your hands should only touch your puppy when you have good things to say, or when you want to cuddle. Grabbing the muzzle, pinning the puppy down on the floor, shaking the puppy, and other physical punishments will serve only to make your puppy hand shy, fearful and confused. Confronting a bossy puppy with a physical challenge can result in more aggressive play, or the encouragement of an attention seeking behavior that will be a hard habit to break when the puppy grows up.

In addition, most puppies will redirect their mouthing to the weaker members of the family, particularly children, who are not adept at physical punishments and reprimands to the same extent as an adult. Now you have created a monster....a dog who is afraid of adults and gets away with biting children. Since dogs do not understand the English language, or any other spoken tongue for that matter, saying "No!" repeatedly, as your voice gets louder, will only serve to encourage some bolder puppies to continue mouthing, and scare other puppies away. Remember, in order for your puppy to learn, you must be clear with your message and teach the lesson in an effective and humane manner.

Initially, you must teach your puppy to stop hurting humans with his razor sharp puppy teeth. Remember the puppy playfighting described above? Mimicking that behavior is the best way to teach your puppy to inhibit the force of his bite and not to use his mouth with force. When your puppy bites down, simply say "Yuck" or "Gross" or something like that, and walk away. Take away all your attention and love for one or two minutes, then go back, make up and resume your previous activity. If the puppy bites again, get up and leave. When done consistently, this will decrease the force of the bite, even though your puppy may mouth you, the bites

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will no longer hurt.

It is also important to eliminate jaw pressure altogether. If the puppy mouths you, even gently, pick the strongest nibble and say "Ouch! That really hurt! I can't believe you bit me!"...even though your puppy didn't really hurt you, act as if you are hurt. Ignore the puppy and walk away again, for a short time, then come back and resume your play or previous activity. Repeating this exercise consistently will teach your puppy that humans are really sensitive and that chewing on them is not a good idea at all.

Finally, it is important to teach the puppy not to mouth at all. This can be accomplished by teaching the puppy to let go of your hand upon command, by using treats to encourage the puppy to let go. Pick a word that you will remember, like "Out" or "Spit" or "Give" and exchange your flesh for the treat. Soon your puppy will learn to let go quickly when he hears the magic word, and this will carry over into relinquishing other things that he may carry around in his mouth as well.

Do not allow your puppy to tug on clothing or personal objects. Offer to exchange what your puppy has latched on to for something appropriate, like a chew toy or a treat. Which means you should carry treats around in your pocket or in a treat pouch. Likewise, chasing the puppy who has confiscated some forbidden item will result in your puppy's favorite game of "Chase me". If your puppy is running around with something valuable in his mouth, whose fault is it anyway? Ignore the puppy and go to the kitchen and rattle the bag with the dog goodies in it, and make a big fuss over what you are "eating", show the puppy what you have, and then offer some. Let put what is left of your valuable away in a safe place.

Management Skills for Older Puppies and Adult Dogs

If your pup is older than 6 months and already has an adult set of teeth, or if you have an adolescent or adult dog, your management skills may vary a little, but the basic concept is still the same.

Providing adequate exercise is key. Continue to offer your older pup or dog the appropriate chew toys that will satisfy their urge to chew. Physical exercise such as fetching, long walks, or tugging can be good outlets to burn up excess energy. The game of tug can be an effective training tool and efficient form of exercise if played correctly (see below). Contrary to folklore, playing tug will not make your dog aggressive or dominant. Remember that certain breeds are prone to using their mouths and work with your dog, not against him.

Ignore the mouth that is used to get your attention. Anything you do other than ignore IS attention, one way or the other, and teaches the dog that using his mouth works to get what he wants. Get up and leave. Say nothing, just walk away. This is a very powerful message, because your dog wants attention, and by using his mouth, he just lost your attention.

If your dog is using his mouth to prevent you from doing something to him, such as holding his collar, putting on the leash, or any other circumstance where you feel the use of the mouth is inappropriate, please contact a behavior counselor or trainer as soon as possible. Work with someone that uses positive humane training methods, not force or physical corrections. Do not try and fix the problem yourself unless you are well versed in canine behavior and learning theory.

"TUG OF PEACE" - The Rules of the Game

1. Pick one specific toy for the game. Keep the toy hidden away until you are ready to play. Your dog should not have free access to the tug toy, and you shouldn't play tug with any other toys. Do not play fetch with the tug toy.
2. When you are ready to play, pick a specific phrase that signals the game will begin. Show your dog the tug toy and say "Wanna Tug?" or "Let's play!".
3. To continue the game, teach your dog how to relinquish the toy on command. The easiest way is by offering incredibly high value treats, such as little pieces of cheese, hot dogs, or chicken. Stop tugging, and offer several really good treats up against your dog's nose. Say the words "Drop it" or "Give", and when your dog drops the toy, give him all the treats in your hand. Then start the game again (double reward for relinquishing the toy).
4. Failure to relinquish the toy results in a "recess". If your dog still has the toy in his mouth, stand very still, ignore the dog for a few seconds and stop tugging. Grip the toy firmly but do not yank on it. Calmly repeat the relinquish procedure until you get the toy. Ignore the dog for several seconds and then start the game over.

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5. Add obedience work into the game if your dog has had some training: for example, when your dog relinquishes the toy to you, ask for a "Sit", practice a "Down", and make him wait a few seconds, then resume the game. If your dog does not have any training, do not offer the toy if your dog jumps up to steal it. Hide the toy behind your back and wait until your dog is standing still or sitting.

6. If your dog becomes rowdy or overexcited during the game, regain control of the toy and wait a few seconds to calm him down, then end the game.

7. Never chase the dog if he gains possession of the tug toy. Ignore him and wait until the toy loses its value. Then calmly pick up the toy and put it away.

8. If the dog should accidentally touch your hand with his teeth while playing, say "Ouch" loudly, end the game immediately and ignore your dog for 2 or 3 minutes.

9. Children should not be allowed to play tug with the dog unless they are fully capable of following the rules of the game.



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