

Dog: Play Biting and Mouthing



What's With All the Biting?

The sheer amount of biting and mouthing your puppy subjects you and your clothing to can be shocking, even a little alarming. The good news, however, is it's normal and healthy behavior, and not in any way an indication your puppy will grow up to be aggressive.

Puppies are hard-wired to chomp on everything. When your puppy starts chomping on you, your first line of defense is to try to redirect her to an approved chew toy. Grab one of her toys and wave it in front of her—make it squeak and seem interesting. When this works, great. When it doesn't, take the opportunity to teach her bite inhibition.

Bite inhibition means that puppies learn how to control their powerful jaws and teeth by the time they have adult teeth at 4.5–5 months. Dogs who have been taught proper bite inhibition as puppies are safer and less likely to bite and cause damage to people and other animals than those who haven't.

How to Teach Bite Inhibition

Bite inhibition has to be taught gradually. If you curb your puppies play biting too early or drastically, she won't have had enough feedback on how to be gentle with her mouth.

Step 1. Accept only moderately hard mouthing on your hands from your puppy. For really hard nipping and all mouthing on other body parts, clothing, and shoes, say “ouch” loudly and turn your back—but be sure not to use a tone that frightens your puppy.

Step 2. When your puppy is calm, turn back to her and praise her. If she continues to mouth hard or on your pant leg, shoes, etc., immediately step over a baby gate, pen, or leave the room for about 20 seconds. If you don't have anywhere to step away to, take your pup to a designated time-out spot for 20 seconds instead.

Step 3. Every week, lower your tolerance for the intensity of your puppy's play bites a little more. Go from accepting only moderately hard mouthing to accepting only gentle mouthing and so forth until your puppy has learned to not put her mouth on you at all.

Note: If your puppy is older than 5 months, all mouthing, even the gentle kind on hands, must be met with an “ouch.”

When your puppy has received her second DHLPP, you can attend puppy socials at the San Francisco SPCA where our trainers can help you guide your puppy to learn bite inhibition with other puppies.

Tips

- Be consistent with your “ouch” feedback. Say it every time your puppy uses her teeth too roughly.
- Don't hold your puppy's muzzle shut with your hands, slap her on the nose, or shout in her face. Studies show such methods increases the likelihood your dog will develop aggression.
- To reduce the intensity of play biting, jumping, and other annoying puppy behaviors, give your puppy lots of chew toys and exercise.
- Always supervise children and puppies.