



Behavior and Training Department Behavior Resources

Biting/Chewing Management For Puppies

Play-Biting Management:

Puppies bite. Not to be nasty, mind you. For puppies, play biting (sometimes called mouthing or puppy biting) is a way to explore the world. Just as a human baby grabs with her hands and explores with her mouth, puppies explore and grab through biting. They play with their siblings using their teeth, and their siblings hardly notice. Play biting is not a sign of aggression; it is a sign of play, and reasonable puppy play is good. Puppy play is how puppies learn. Play biting is normal puppy behavior and the method by which puppies explore their worlds.

From watching puppies, it's normal for puppies between about six and sixteen weeks old to be obsessed with play fighting. When two puppies of this age meet, they want to wrestle. At this age, Mother Nature has given them needle-sharp puppy teeth, so they can really sting each other but they can't cause serious damage. It is believed that the lesson that puppies learn at this age is the most important one a puppy can learn: how much bite is enough and how much bite is too much.

But to humans, puppy bites hurt. Those tiny teeth are as sharp as needles. The puppy doesn't know that, of course. She doesn't have any idea that you aren't covered in tough canine skin. Just because play biting is normal doesn't mean you should let your puppy bite anything she wants. Most humans find play biting obnoxious at best and painful at worst. Yet, you must avoid punishing this behavior. You do not want to take a puppy that is playing and turn her into a fearful or aggressive dog.

Any dog, no matter how stable of temperament, can be pushed into a position where they feel they must bite to defend themselves. The difference is bite inhibition.

The traditional methods of teaching puppies never to bite include things like scruff shakes, cuffing the puppy under the chin or the infamous "alpha wolf rollover." A very common complaint by people who use these methods is that the puppy turns around and bites harder. Two puppies playing together egg each other on by jumping on each other, poking at each other with their feet, and wrestling! No wonder many puppies come back and bite harder - their human is giving them every indication they should.

How do puppies learn bite inhibition? By biting! Trying to teach a puppy bite inhibition without allowing them to bite is like trying to teach a child to ride a bike without ever letting them get on the bike. It just can't be done.

How do puppies learn when they've bitten too hard? They give each other feedback. Just enough bite is rewarded with more play. Too much bite and the other puppy yelps and stops playing. It works for humans too: let the puppy bite and give a very high-pitched yelp if there's too much pressure. A normal puppy will back off for an instant. If the human is a good actor, the puppy will do some self-calming by shaking or sitting down to scratch or else apologize by giving a lick. It's often best to rehearse your high-pitched IPE! or OUCH! in private before trying it out on your puppy.

If the puppy comes right back and bites harder, give another high-pitched yelp and walk away. Go somewhere the puppy can't reach you. The message: puppies that can't play nice play alone.

Some people roll the puppy's lip over their teeth either to prevent biting or to promote bite inhibition. This is not as effective because the puppy has to learn to moderate their bite without the feedback of pain from their own nervous system.

Very quickly, the puppy learns how much bite is enough to make the game fun and how much bite stops the game altogether. They bite and mouth, but they do it in such a way that it doesn't hurt at all.



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Chewing Management:

Puppies also chew to explore the world and they chew like a wood chipper when they are teething. The absolute best way to manage chewing is to limit your puppy's access to chew things she isn't allowed to chew.

Just as you child-proof a home against a toddler, you should puppy-proof your home against a chewer.

Take the following precautions:

- Hide or tape up all electrical cords.
- Keep shoes in closed closets.
- Secure cords from window blinds so puppy can't reach them.
- Keep garbage out of reach.
- Police the floor on a daily basis for choking hazards such as paper clips, rubber bands and pieces of string.
- Keep everything of value to you that could possibly be destroyed by chewing out of puppy's reach.

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