

Puppy Play Biting



Puppy biting is NORMAL!

Play-fighting and play-biting are *essential* for the puppy in order to develop good social skills and a soft and sensitive mouth as an adult. Just as children try to grab, slap, poke and prod with their hands and fingers before they learn to control them, so do puppies use their mouths in the same way.

Why can't I just punish him and stop him from biting altogether?

That may give you a temporary relief, but it can be potentially dangerous, because the use of punishment / corrections can have undesirable and very serious side-effects, such as hand-shyness, aggressiveness, fear-biting, etc.



Children & Play Bites

As many as 50% of children will have been bitten by a dog by the time they are 12 years old. Many of these children are bitten by the family pet (*ref. Doggonesafe.com*). These bites often happen during play. Young puppies nip as part of play, and children are often not taught how to interact appropriately with dogs, or they are too young to be able to follow the instructions and not supervised appropriately.

Adult supervision of children and dogs at all times is IMPERATIVE and inappropriate interactions should not only be interrupted, but prevented from occurring in the first place!

Please ask for specific information on how to do this if you have young children.

When the puppy nips, children tend to increase their movements and they sometimes scream and yell, just like a giant, live squeaky toy. No wonder the dog cannot resist! If the child then also throws himself on the floor, or stumbles, this may further encourage the rough-housing.

Rewards Drive Behaviour

For the same reason that we can teach a dog to perform a behaviour by providing timely rewards, so can we extinguish behaviours that we do not want the dog to perform by removing the dog's reward for that behaviour.

Before we can remove the reward for a behaviour, however, we must first identify what that reward is. That can sometimes be difficult, either because we simply have trouble figuring out what the reward might be, or because the reward is difficult to remove from the behaviour; some behaviours are even self-rewarding, like chewing on a toy because your teeth hurt.

Take, for example, the behaviour of "begging" at the table. If, in the past, somebody has been giving the dog tidbits from the table when she was begging, that food has rewarded the behaviour of begging. If you stop giving the dog food at the table and ignore the begging behaviour (and not reward it with your attention, either!), the behaviour of begging will eventually go away. Before it does, however, your dog will try harder for a while in order to get the same result (food) as before, aka. an "extinction burst". (1)

Play biting is usually the way in which your puppy engages you in play. Your engagement with the puppy, by talking to him (even telling him to stop), pushing him away (a play invitation in dog language) or even simply looking at him, may function as a reward for this behaviour, even if intended it to be a correction.

Training Plan

1. FIRST OF ALL: Do not scare or hurt your puppy.
2. MOST IMPORTANT: Make sure to satisfy your puppy's innate needs for play and other mental stimulation. This includes, for example, NOT feeding at regular mealtimes out of a bowl, but feeding in food puzzles and also throughout the day (carrying the food on your person) as rewards for good behaviour (sitting, walking on a loose leash, coming when called, etc). When the puppy comes up to you, and BEFORE he starts his annoying attention-seeking with nipping, jumping, etc, you should immediately stop whatever else you were doing and play with him, so that you break his habit of jumping and biting you. Then work on rewarding all sits per the separate training sheet "Sit Level 0".
3. Make sure that you do not reward the biting by continuing the play, and that you do not react to the biting by becoming excited in any way. Understand that if you have been rewarding your puppy for a long time by giving him attention (either positive or negative) when he has been nipping at you, the behaviour has a long and strong reinforcement history. In that case, change is not going to happen immediately, but it may take a correspondingly long time of consistent application of these instructions to achieve reliable and consistent improvement for the future.
4. FOR ADULT HUMANS ONLY: Whenever the puppy nips or bites, all the fun stops! IMMEDIATELY stop interacting: pull your hand away, fold your arms, look at the ceiling and freeze for ONE second only. Then immediately go back and play again. When you do, expect your puppy to bite again. IMMEDIATELY pull your hand away, fold your arms, look at the ceiling and freeze for ONE second only. Then, immediately go back and play again. Repeat as necessary until the puppy gets the message. This can take anything from a few minutes to several days, depending on how much reward history the puppy has had to date for biting, and how consistent you are in your application of this protocol.
5. FOR ADULT HUMANS ONLY: Consider using a tug-toy when you play with your puppy, so that he can put his teeth into that rather than onto your hands and arms. He does need to use his teeth. Since the puppy enjoys playing with you, he will soon learn to inhibit his bite to keep the game going. That way, he will learn to be gentle, what is known as "mouthing", or softly putting his mouth on you. Using his mouth is of course the only way he can hold your hand! All his paws are for walking...!
6. FOR CHILDREN: A small child should be instructed to "Be A Tree" (stand still, fold your arms and look at your feet) or "Be A Rock" (curl up on your knees on the floor with your hands covering the back of your neck). This can be difficult for a young child to remember, so parents need to be patient with both the child and the dog and expect to have to repeat these instructions often.
NOTE: No child under the age of 12 years old should be with a dog unless a responsible adult is DIRECTLY AND ACTIVELY supervising their interactions.
7. Expect that it will take some time before the old behaviour has been extinguished and the new behaviour has taken its place. How long, will depend on:
 - a. How long your puppy has successfully been rewarded for his inappropriate behaviour; and
 - b. How much patience and consistency you are able to apply in your interactions with your puppy.

(1) IMPORTANT: The Extinction Burst

Before a behaviour extinguishes, it is likely to get stronger for a short while – "it gets worse before it gets better". When the dog's usual attempts at getting your attention don't work (for example by trying to get you to play by biting and nipping), she will at first try harder to get the usual reaction. When she does that, it is very important that you "stick to your guns" and not give in (if you are unable to, you will end up teaching her to escalate!). This "extinction burst" is a normal part of the process and its occurrence confirms that what you are doing is affecting the dog's behaviour! Good job!

If you have any questions or concerns about the application of this behaviour modification programme, please do not hesitate to contact Cowichan Canine. ■