

Puppies – mouthing and biting

All puppies mouth and bite as they explore their environment. It is an important part of their process of development. They use their mouths as one of their senses, like smell or taste. Puppies learn about the texture, temperature and hardness of objects partly through mouthing and biting.

Puppies also learn the rules of play with other puppies and dogs, in part, through play biting. They learn not to bite their litter-mates too hard. They practise parts of the stages of hunting by play biting. Play is an important part of the puppy's experience if s/he is to become a well socialised puppy, able to interact with other dogs in an acceptable way. Play biting is important in learning to control aggression levels in young dogs.

When they are teething puppies find relief from chewing and biting on hard objects in the same way that human babies do. Teething can be a painful process and puppies should always be provided with suitable chew toys which are freely available.

Teaching your puppy bite inhibition:

Puppies naturally learn to inhibit their bites when they play with their litter mates. Older dogs play-bite with each other, but rarely actually bite each other. It is important for puppies to learn to apply the skill of bite inhibition with people, as well as other dogs.

- Start with the 'ouch' method. When the puppy bites a hand say, give a sharp, high-pitched cry of 'ouch' in the way that another pup would if it was hurt by a bite. If the puppy stops biting reward him/her. If the puppy does not stop, withdraw from the puppy and look hurt.

- It is very important that you do not smile at the puppy or laugh at play biting or mouthing of people or clothing. The puppy will read your facial expressions very well and if you smile or laugh the puppy will think that mouthing or biting people is what you want him/her to do.

- If the puppy bites again as hard, or harder, than before, leave the puppy immediately. Walk away and ignore him/her. Leave the room if you need to.

- In this way, teach the puppy that no bites are allowed on either human skin or clothing.

- Be very consistent in this no biting message – the puppy/dog will learn quickly if you are consistent and respond in the same way each time they mouth or bite people or clothing.

Alternatives to biting people or clothing:

- Give the puppy something else to mouth and chew, which is appropriate, such as a chew toy, rope or rubber toy.

- Teach the puppy not to try to make contact with your hand by playing tuggie with a long rope toy. Keep the toy for this game only. If the puppy tries to mouth your hand during the game, say 'ouch,' stop the game immediately and put the toy away until later.

What to avoid:

- Never play rough and tumble games or handle your dog roughly to encourage biting of your hands – always use a toy for games. The dog/puppy needs to learn the rule that no mouthing or biting of human skin or clothes is allowed – because it hurts.

Remember:

- All puppies mouth and bite.
- Play biting is normal.
- Puppies explore their environment using their mouths.
- This is an important part of sense development for puppies.
- Chewing and biting relieve the pain of teething.

Remember also:

- All dogs have the ability and potential to bite.
- They have excellent teeth, and very strong jaws.
- As they grow up puppies must learn to control the strength in their jaws and teeth so that they do not show inappropriate biting behaviours towards people or other dogs.
- Teach appropriate behaviours from a very early age – this is the easiest time to train your puppy and before a normal, natural behaviour becomes a problem one.

