

Training Your dog:

Puppy Biting & Mouthing

Young puppies often mouth and bite in play, and may become over exuberant, forgetting themselves and biting quite hard in the process. Being nipped by sharp puppy teeth hurts, and is not something to be tolerated. Many people mistakenly assume that the puppy will "grow out of it". Unfortunately, this is by no means always the case, and puppies that are allowed to get away with "play" biting may become a major problem as they grow up. A few ground rules will need to be laid down early to ensure that the puppy never learns to use its mouth in the wrong way.

Bite Inhibition

This is an essential trait that puppies learn while still in the nest, but it is an on-going learning process, and a bit of "revision" may be needed to ensure that the puppy understands that it applies to his relationship with the human beings in his life as well as to his interactions with other dogs.

Puppies in the litter play rough games. They can get quite carried away, rolling and tumbling around, wrestling and trying out their new teeth on each other. These play fights are an important preparation for adult life, teaching the puppies how to relate to and avoid aggression in their encounters with other dogs. During these games, inevitably, a puppy will nip another puppy too hard. The bitten pup responds with a sharp yelp, which signals to the biter that he or she has gone too far, and will either stop playing, becoming subdued, or bite back. The puppies thus learn that if they bite too hard the game will stop, and they may also get hurt themselves. In this way, they gradually learn to inhibit the strength of their bite.

Maternal Discipline

In addition to learning games played with litter mates, the puppies are also disciplined by their mother when they overstep the mark. The bitch will first of all freeze, and give a warning growl to the offending puppy, accompanied by piercing eye contact. If this is ignored, a full throated snarl follows, and the bitch will pin the pup down with wide open jaws, or hold him round the nose with her teeth. The pup will respond by rolling over submissively and whimpering or crying, at which point the bitch withdraws and ignores the puppy altogether. Very soon, all the bitch needs to do is to growl and stare at the puppy to stop the unwanted action in its tracks.

Both of these pre-learned reactions can be used to advantage when needing to stop a puppy from biting, and teaching what is and is not acceptable behaviour.

Teaching the Puppy not to Bite or Mouth

It is natural to want to play with your puppy, and indeed, properly controlled games are an excellent vehicle for training and developing a good relationship with your dog. However, games must not be allowed to get out of hand.

ALWAYS supervise games between puppies and children, since both will quickly become Grand Masters at the art of winding each other up, and if you are not there to intervene when the games start to get rough you will be unable to control what the puppy is learning. Remember, too, that the skin of small children is very delicate, and needle sharp puppy teeth can easily draw blood without meaning to.

Encouraging play with toys, particularly retrieve games where the pup learns to run after a thrown toy, hold and bring it back are an excellent and positive way of channelling exuberant puppy energy. All rough and tumble games where hands, arms or other parts of the body, or items of worn clothing are treated as toys should be actively discouraged.

Play Biting

When the puppy inadvertently nips while playing, the immediate response should be a sharp yelp (as if you were another puppy) and immediate cessation of the game. All attention should be withdrawn from the pup for a few minutes while the lesson sinks in, after which the game may resume. This should be the response **WHenever** teeth connect with any part of the body or item of clothing, even if the bite is not hard enough to hurt. The puppy must learn that fun and games **STOP** as soon as he uses his teeth.

Some energetic puppies may seem to go out of their way to grab and bite at whichever bit of human comes within range. If this is the case, it may be necessary to be rather more firm to gain the sort of respect that the puppy learned to give his mother.

As with the occasional nip described above, games or other friendly interaction should stop the instant the pup becomes too rough. In addition, a verbal signal of disapproval such as a very firm "No" or sharp "Ah" in a low, almost growly tone should be accompanied by piercing eye contact which should be maintained until the puppy looks away and complies. He should then be ignored for a few minutes as before. With a small puppy it may be effective to restrain the pup and hold his nose gently but firmly while maintaining eye contact, then releasing and ignoring him. (This must **NEVER** be attempted on bigger stronger puppies, or older dogs that bite)!

Attention Seeking Biting

Puppies that get underfoot, grabbing at ankles or shoe laces are best deterred by a well aimed squirt from a water pistol or something similar. This sort of biting tends to be attention seeking, and the puppy may also chew other things such as chair and table legs etc in front of you to try to get your attention. Avoid trying to get hold of the puppy or push him away, as this gives him the attention he wants. Instead, an instant unpleasant experience, in the form of a face full of cold water that appears to the puppy not to be connected

with you is very effective. It is important not to say anything to the puppy as you squirt him, but follow up with quiet praise and something like a chew or toy to occupy him when he is behaving correctly. A sound deterrent such as a bunch of keys thrown near (but not at) him when he is doing something he shouldn't works in a similar way.

The methods described above should cure the problem permanently in most puppies up to about 16 - 18 weeks old. If, however, the biting persists or becomes worse, or you have an older adolescent dog who "answers back" when you attempt to discipline him in this way, PLEASE contact the surgery for advice. Very dominant, pushy puppies may continue to challenge despite these efforts, in which case you need more behavioural help.

This information has been compiled by Sarah Coton, Head Veterinary Nurse and Canine Behaviour Consultant at our Warwick centre. Further advice is available by appointment.