

Play Biting in Puppies | VCA Animal Hospital | VCA Animal Hospitals

Why is my puppy nipping and biting family members?

Although often thought to be a teething behavior, nipping, mouthing and biting in young dogs is generally a form of social play. Teething is more likely to involve gnawing or chewing on household objects. The first thing you must do is to provide a regular daily routine that includes ample opportunity for play (see Enrichment, Predictability, and Scheduling and Play and Exercise). Social play with people could involve controlled chase and retrieve games, as well as long walks or jogging. Many dogs also enjoy engaging in tug games, which may be an excellent outlet for play biting, providing the games are directed toward appropriate play toys and objects (see below) and under human control. However, if the puppy's play becomes too rambunctious or aggressive, these games may not initially be acceptable.



Puppies need to learn to limit the force and strength of their bite so if mouth contact is utilized, the message is communicated with minimal damage, commonly known as bite inhibition. This is something they start to learn while with their littermates. It is one reason that puppies should not go to new homes until 7 to 8 weeks of age and they have had time to practice social skills with other dogs. Often littermates play very rough and may even seem loud and aggressive. Sometimes one puppy bites another one too hard and screams out; this startles the offending puppy and teaches him how hard to bite during play. These lessons are essential for a puppy and people should not intervene in most littermate puppy – puppy interactions. In addition, after puppies have been adopted into the new home, it can be extremely beneficial to have regular interactive social play periods with other dogs or puppies in the home or in the neighborhood (see Play and Exercise). One of the things that puppies need to learn is how much pressure from their jaws causes pain. Without this feedback, a puppy does not learn to inhibit the force of its bite. Because all dogs can and will bite at some time, this lesson is vital for human safety.

How can I stop play biting?

Be sure you are providing the puppy adequate and appropriate play, exploration, attention and exercise opportunities. Strategies to stop play biting include:

Prevention: Adopt a puppy at 7 weeks so he has had the opportunity to practice normal, social play with littermates and mom.

Set up to succeed: Provide a “mouthy” puppy with toys for oral stimulation; soft toys, food toys and tug of war can help satisfy these puppies’ oral and exploratory needs.

Be consistent: Family members should agree that the puppy not be allowed or encouraged to bite or nibble on people's hands, feet or clothing. What seems cute and innocent in a puppy will not be at maturity.

How is this lesson taught?

When puppies play with each other, if one puppy bites another too hard, the bitten puppy will yelp, and may also stop playing and leave. This sends the message to the puppy that its bites were too hard and if it wishes to continue to play, it needs to be gentle. However, people often do not send this message to their puppy. In the beginning, some owners might allow their puppies to chew and bite on them without reprimands and the puppy assumes that the behavior is acceptable.

Children appear to be most vulnerable because their attempts at stopping the biting may not be properly timed or sufficiently abrupt to stop the puppy from biting. In fact a child's response is often seen by the puppy as an invitation to increase its level of chase and play. Adult supervision or a head halter for training (discussed below) should help to ensure more immediate success.



The message people should send is that mouthing and chewing on hands is painful and it leads to immediate cessation of play. All family members must consistently follow the rules for the puppy to understand and learn what is considered desirable behavior and what is not. However, regardless of the technique, you cannot expect the play biting to cease until you first ensure that you are giving regular and sufficient opportunities for play. If your puppy begins to bite or chew and tug on clothing, immediately stopping play (negative punishment) is the preferred response or walk away if the puppy persists. The message is that all social interactions with you will stop as soon as biting begins. Sometimes a sharp "off" command can be helpful to indicate that social interactions will cease if the biting continues. Playing with the puppy when it is not attention seeking, nipping or biting is the goal. In fact, all forms of play and attention soliciting behavior should be ignored, as these might escalate into more intense biting. If all family members are consistent in their responses, the puppy should quickly learn that play biting actually leads to inattention rather than play. If you teach your puppy to sit or lie quietly before each play session, you should soon have your puppy trained that these behaviors, and not play biting, will be rewarded with a play session (see Learn to Earn – Predictable Rewards).

"If the puppy persists, chases, or immediately repeats the behavior, closing a door and walking out of the room can help to teach the puppy that biting leads to immediate inattention."

If ignoring the puppy and walking away does not stop the biting, then you will need to work on training desirable behaviors and discouraging the undesirable behavior. Having a leash attached at all times during interactions and play can be an excellent means of preventing undesirable behavior, as well as prompting and teaching desirable behavior. Another technique is to emit a sharp “yip” or “ouch” as soon as biting begins so that the puppy backs off. Remember any contact with the skin should lead to an immediate cessation of play and attention. This sends the message to the puppy that the bites are painful and that biting will cause the end of play. Alternately, a sharp “off” command and quickly backing away can be effective. Using a verbal cue such as yip, ouch or off or enough is intended to interrupt the behavior and indicate that play and attention will now cease. This training usually works for those family members that most immediate, consistent and clear in their responses. If the puppy persists, chases or immediately repeats the behavior, closing a door and walking out of the room can help to teach the puppy that biting leads to immediate inattention.

What if my puppy keeps biting?

Other techniques are often suggested for play biting. Some involve harsh discipline but it's important to remember that pain can cause aggression and cause the puppy to become anxious, fearful, defensive or perhaps more excited. Some puppies may misinterpret the owner's attempts at punishment as rough play, which in turn might lead to an increase in the behavior. **Physical methods are not recommended.** Owners who cannot inhibit the puppy with a yelp could consider a shaker can, water or air spray, noise alarm, or ultrasonic device as soon as the biting becomes excessive. The loud noise or spray is used to startle the puppy, and it will likely back up and stop biting. When that happens the puppy should immediately be praised and gentle play and interactions resumed. The use of a head halter with a remote leash attached allows the puppy to play and chew, but immediate pressure on the leash can redirect and successfully close the mouth and stop biting or chewing as soon as it becomes undesirable. By simultaneously saying “no biting,” most puppies will quickly learn the meaning of the command. As soon as the puppy stops the tension on the leash can be released. If the biting resumes then a gentle and immediate pull and release may be needed until the puppy remains calm at which point the play can be resumed as long as biting does not begin again. This is one of the quickest and most effective approaches to stop the biting and get immediate control of the muzzle and mouth, and is useful for owners that are not gaining sufficient verbal control (see Training Products – Head Halter Training and Training Products – Head Halter Training – Synopsis).



Remember that this kind of biting is a component of play behavior in puppies. Play is a form of social interaction and your puppy is practicing his social and communication skills. Realize that your puppy is trying to play with you, even though the behavior is rough. Play motivated bites still hurt! Also remember that each puppy and each breed has a different level of intensity or a slightly different form in which play is exhibited so try and match the length and type of play to the needs of the puppy. Be assured your puppy is not trying to dominate or control you. Your puppy needs adequate play and each puppy has different needs (see Play and Exercise and Dominance,

Alpha, and Pack Leadership – What Does It Really Mean?). Be certain that you are initiating attention and play often enough to meet your dog's needs. Hounds may enjoy games in which they use their nose to find interesting treats or just a long walk with opportunities to spend time with nose to the ground. Retrieving, agility, flyball and even tug games with toys, encourage play that should not lead to mouthing of the owners. If you allow your puppy to initiate all play and attention sessions with pawing, barking, jumping up or mouthing, then these may escalate into more intense attention soliciting or even play biting if you subsequently try to ignore the behavior. On the other hand, if you teach your puppy to sit or lie down calmly in front of you prior to play then these behaviors can be rewarded. In addition, you should end each session abruptly if biting occurs. One strategy is to use a command such as sit or down, and reward the behavior with a chew or feeding toy. Another is that if the play gets too rough and involves biting, immediately end the play session and leave. Social withdrawal can be a very powerful tool. Leave the puppy alone long enough to be confused by your absence. If upon your return the biting resumes, leave again. Your puppy may be as active, wild or animated as you will allow but you are teaching him that biting doesn't have a place in your interaction with him. Although it is tempting to pick the puppy up and take it out of the room, your puppy may interpret this interaction as additional play and the biting may continue as you carry the puppy to a confinement location. Keep track of which types of play seem to get the puppy too excited and these should be avoided to help prevent biting behavior. **Be sure to provide enough appropriate outlets for energetic puppies; if you aren't meeting your puppies social, exploratory and energy needs then these strategies will not work!**

Can I play tug games with my puppy?

Games of tug and pull can be a good way for the puppy to expend energy while playing with family members. In this way the puppy can be given an acceptable outlet for pulling, biting and tugging rather than on the clothing or body parts of people. The rule is the person should stop the game abruptly and socially withdraw anytime the puppy's teeth touch human skin or clothing or the puppy becomes overly excited and agitated. In addition, the tug of war game provides an opportunity to teach the puppy to give up toys on command.

However, tug games are only acceptable if they remain under your control, and if play biting and over exuberant play does not result in aggression if the puppies teeth remain on the toy rather than human body parts, and if possessive behavior does not develop over the toy. Select a few tug toys for playing this game and be certain that you are the one to start each session. It might be best to keep the toy(s) out of the puppy's reach until its time to play the game and to use the game and toy as a reward for training (e.g., sit before play or retrieve). Throughout the play session, if the puppy gets too excited or begins to grab hands or clothing, immediately cease play and begin again only when the puppy is settled down. Animation and exuberant play is acceptable; biting on people or their clothing is not! Food rewards can also be used at the outset to encourage the puppy to stop and give up the toy. At the end of each tug session, teach the puppy to give up the toy and reward with a favored chew or feeding toy. If successful, this type of play provides you with a means of controlled interactive play, as well as teaching the puppy to give up the toy on command.

Following each play session, give the puppy a chance to eliminate and some down time. Try and use a crate or confinement pen with object play toys e.g., food stuffed toys and chews that have been saved for confinement time so that the puppy can play with the toys or take a nap until the next scheduled play, exercise, training, or elimination session is due.