

## Biting and Mouth Manners



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### Biting is Normal for Dogs

Puppies have no hands so they explore the world with their mouths. As they grow, they learn how to use their mouths appropriately. Puppies and dogs play with their mouths, they grab each other and pull, wrestle and can be quite raucous! Mouth manners lessons begin very young. By the time a pup is older, he will have learned good mouth manners with his own species.

Puppies are not born knowing how to behave with humans. We are not dogs: we have a different set of behavioral norms and desired manners. Dogs have to learn how to work with our species and we have to understand how mouth manners begin. When puppies play with their mother and siblings, they use their mouths along with their paws and learn how to interact with their own species. Puppies learn how to control their jaw strength by how the puppies and adult dogs with respond. Gentle jaws means play continues. Painful jaws means play stops. If the breeder or rescue the puppy came from is good at early puppy socializing with humans, early mouth manners lessons with humans will have begun before the puppy goes home. When the puppy goes into his new home ideally between 8 – 12 weeks of age, it is hoped he will have gotten a solid basis regarding mouth manners and humans. Now it is up to the owner to continue the lessons or begin lessons if nothing was done prior to placement. If not, this could mean bad news.

I would expect a young puppy, even with basic work prior to placement to use his mouth on people. It is how the new owner responds and works with the puppy that will determine what level of bite risk the puppy becomes. Let us take a moment and look at few ways puppies may become adolescent and biters.

1. Inadequate, improper or no work during the crucial puppy stage (0 – 16 weeks).
2. Puppy is poorly socialized and is constantly stressed and anxious.
3. Humans teaching that games where puppy bites (such as tiny puppy tugging fingers, toes, clothing and wrestling) are acceptable.
4. Play gone awry – allowed to get too rough.
5. Puppy was being teased and became frustrated.
6. Puppy feels threatened by humans and has learned only using his mouth will get the scary things to back off.
7. Puppy taught intentionally to bite as “protection” for their owner but without proper instruction and training from a highly knowledgeable protection dog trainer.

The worst things humans can do is not teach a puppy mouth control lessons or teach him through our actions that humans are chew toys or need to be bitten because we are scary. If meaningful work is done the first three to four months of a puppy's life, the better chance the puppy will not only learn good mouth manners but in times of stress, remember those lessons. The more meaningful work in general done with a puppy, the more likely he is to remain in his home when he is grown.

Would I consider a young puppy (under 16 weeks of age) that has bitten a dangerous dog? Chances are no. Again, puppies use their mouths. Very rarely is a puppy born dangerous. In reality, most bites from dogs are a reaction to something a human has done – even play gone bad. However, how humans manage the puppy and deal with him after the bite makes the difference with the puppy learning good mouth manners or continuing to bite. It also determines will the puppy become a confident member of a household or become fearful of humans therefore increasing the bite risk. As the puppy ages, it is still possible to teach mouth manners. The longer an undesired behavior is allowed to persist or is inappropriately worked with, the longer it can take to resolve.

Children are often victims of bites because of the virtue of what a child is: loud, they move fast, they squeal and wiggle, they get in a puppy or dog's face, they play games that encourage biting (often without realizing it), they do not realize when a puppy is getting too riled up or frustrated and when play must stop. Children have a habit of racing into the face of a dog in order to greet; this is very scary and threatening. They fail to exercise good judgment with dogs. Parents fail to properly supervise play, properly teach the child good behavior around dogs and then blame the animal when something happens – even if the animal was reacting to the child. It is amazing what parents will demand a dog tolerate. I had a client who insisted her puppy learn to allow her child to climb on her back, slide under her like a baseball playing heading to home plate, pull her tail, hit her and torment her while she slept or ate. Mom was shocked the first time the dog turned and nipped.

One of the first bite cases I consulted on involved a 12 week old Bichon Frisé and a child of about 10. The girl was unsupervised while playing with the puppy. The puppy “suddenly” bit her in the face. She caught the child's lower lip and did damage. I took the child aside and asked her to tell me what happened. The child was playing a game where as the puppy started to jump for a toy, the human yanked it away. The puppy was trying harder and harder to get the toy. The girl said the puppy was really excited. The girl was leaning over the puppy and pulling the toy up and towards her (the child's) face. At the moment of the bite, the child had pulled the toy away, the puppy was mid-leap and the child bent lower.

I wish I could say these incidents were rare. Sadly many bites to children occur because there was inadequate supervision, improper training of the child, unrealistic parental expectations for the dog and the puppy had not been taught bite inhibition. What is Bite Inhibition? Simple: teaching mouth control. This was started by Dr. Ian Dunbar and over the years has become the way good trainers teach today. It causes far less behavioral damage to a dog than the old ways of teaching a dog not to bite.

## **Mouth Manners**

The first lesson is to teach that your mouth has strength and you can control it. Let puppy apply a bit of pressure when he puts his mouth on you. He needs to learn how hard is too hard. This is vital as if he never learns jaw control; he may use too much power and hurt someone. Allowing the pup to mouth and stopping the play when the mouthing hurts teaches “Hey, I have jaw strength and need to control it! If not, all play stops.” There are many theories about why puppy teeth are sharp and it is now assumed that it is to help teach jaw control. Adult dogs have strong jaws and blunter teeth than

puppies. Adult jaws are capable of picking up very gently or crushing bone. If jaw control is not learned when young, it can be a detriment – especially to a family pet. Sharp puppy teeth hurt a lot and obnoxious mouth behavior is less likely to be tolerated.

Old methods failed to teach jaw control and went straight to teaching no mouth on us at all. Now this may give us a respite from the pain of puppy teeth, but does nothing to teach a puppy appropriate jaw control. What now when your puppy is all grown up and does not know how to control his strength? Even in play, a lot of damage can be done at the jaws of a dog with no inhibition. This is why it is important to teach puppies from a young age that they can and must control their own strength. It is far easier to teach this to a puppy than it is to an adult dog. This means I am going to let puppy put his mouth on me but how I respond is what teaches that control.

I allow my puppy to apply pressure and when the pressure gets too much give an “OUCH!” and walk away. (If this seems to excite your puppy more or frighten your puppy, ease up on the verbal). Now, all play stops, you quickly get up and go. Be deliberate in walking away. After 3 – 5 seconds, return to the puppy, call him to you, lure him into a sit and begin playing again. If you wait more than 3 – 5 seconds before re-initiating interactions, your puppy’s brain is moving on to the next life adventure. Eventually, Puppy learns that if he gets too rough, all his fun comes to an end. As puppy applies less and less pressure, I keep up with the lesson. I want NO pressure at all on my skin!

Now he needs to learn that if his mouth gets on a human, all play stops and he gets nothing. The moment puppy starts to bite or nip, give an “OUCH!!!” Glare at the pup, get up and move away. **AGAIN - if you notice the yelp excites the puppy, STOP the verbal and just get up and walk away.** Three to five seconds later, return to the pup and begin to pat again. Use gentle but definite movements, fluttering your hands about like a nervous bird is not soothing and can incite a nip.

Puppies are very social creatures and refusing to engage in play can be an effective and non-threatening way to teach not to bite and there is little chance he will develop fears of hands coming near his neck or mouth and the old pinning and scruffing methods caused. Trust me, I taught the old ways for years and there are still pieces of mine from many years ago floating around on the internet. There is a reason good trainers no longer use these methods: they cause fears and other behavioral problems.

I will never grab puppy’s collar, drag him to a crate and confine, etc. This only teaches puppy that my hand on his collar is a bad thing and that his crate is a bad place. However, if I notice my puppy is over tired or over stimulated, then I need to relax him and calm him down. I will calmly encourage him to go to his crate, give him something like a Kong ® with cheese or peanut butter inside to work on and let him take a rest.

If you have yelped and walked away a couple times and pup keeps coming back for more because he thinks this part of the game, stop the verbal. Instead immediately step out of the room, close a door or step over a baby gate and wait a few moments (3 – 5 seconds). YOU ARE GONE. Go back to the puppy and try again.

Once puppy bites gently and there is no pain, you must continue to act as though there is pain to keep reinforcing the lesson. They will forget the lessons and may start to bite harder or try to use his mouth on you in play.

What if you have a dog you wish to Schutzhund train or do Ring Sport with? Bite Inhibition is still important. He can learn to bite that sleeve hard and hold on but once that sleeve is off, that mouth

cannot hurt that person. It is very possible to have a dog with excellent bite inhibition and that can also be a good working dog in various ring sports. A good ring sport trainer will be able to guide you.

What if your pup tries to grab clothing for attention? When we yell, carry on, tug back and such, we are making a game of this. The best thing is not to allow your pup to come up and grab. Teach him instead to come to you and sit for attention. Then you can engage in play with a suitable toy.

I cannot emphasize enough to avoid all methods often suggested that include grabbing the muzzle, grabbing his scruff and shaking (grabbing the pup by his neck and shaking), tongue pinching, and such. All these can teach puppy that your hands in his mouth will cause bad things. What happens when you have to brush his teeth, get something out of his mouth or have to check his mouth for something? He may not allow it out of fear of our hands near his mouth.

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