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Play Biting in Puppies

Why is my puppy mouthing, nipping, and biting family members?

Puppies use their mouths to explore their environment and to interact with their littermates. As they develop, they practice placing their teeth on objects, other animals, and people.

Even before they are weaned from their mothers, puppies begin to play with their littermates, and this play usually includes some biting and mouthing. If a puppy bites too hard, the recipient might yelp and stop playing – that is how puppies learn rules of social etiquette. As they mature, they begin to better understand their own strength and learn to be gentler. They modify their bites and become alert to signs that the recipient is uncomfortable.



Just as it can take a young child many months to learn to pat a dog gently, it can take a puppy many weeks to understand how to moderate their mouth pressure. Their lessons are further complicated as they begin to interact with more people and fewer dogs. You can expect your puppy to make a few mistakes along the way.

Young puppies are very sensitive to adverse social experiences and even one scary interaction could permanently jeopardize their ability to trust people.

It is important to teach an appropriate play style without scolding your puppy. Remember, your puppy has just left an environment in which she and all her companions routinely participated in games that involved biting and nipping. If you scold your puppy, even if you are gentle, your puppy could become frightened. Young puppies are very sensitive to adverse social experiences and even one scary interaction could permanently jeopardize their ability to trust people. Be assured that your puppy is normal and just needs you to gently teach her a new set of play guidelines, particularly when it comes to playing with humans.

It can be beneficial to provide your puppy with opportunities to play with other healthy puppies that are similar in size and temperament. If your puppy is timid, she could be overwhelmed by a boisterous puppy, and vice versa. Some adult dogs are known to be gentle, tolerant, and safe with young puppies. If you are not certain about the temperament of an adult dog, do not risk an interaction, as your puppy could be harmed emotionally and physically.

In addition to using their teeth during play, young puppies may begin to mouth (gnaw on) people as they begin teething. Teething usually begins around 12 weeks of age and can continue for several months.

If your puppy mouths and bites to get you to interact, know that this is normal, although not necessarily desirable. However, if your puppy uses her mouth to **stop** you from interacting, particularly if your puppy snarls or growls and then reaches forward to bite you, this may not be normal. For example, if your puppy bites you when you reach to pick her up, fasten her leash, or try to pet her, she may be saying “stop” rather than “let’s play”. If in doubt, contact your veterinarian. Your puppy may be in pain or may be developing aggressive behavior related to fear, possessions, or social conflict.



How can I stop play biting?

Teach your puppy a new play style by supporting her when she engages in toy-related games, rather than scolding her for biting playfully. At worst, scolding can frighten your puppy enough to cause permanent mistrust of interactions with people. On the other hand, some very confident puppies may consider scolding to be a new form of extreme play. Such puppies can become very excited, and thus begin to bite harder.

Remember that play biting is a normal, partly innate, and partly learned behavior. Your role is to teach the value of the new game. Be consistent so that your puppy does not become confused. All family members and friends should refrain from interacting with your puppy if your puppy begins to nip or mouth.

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One helpful strategy is to always carry a favored toy in your pocket. If your puppy begins to gnaw on you, quickly offer the toy instead. You may need to move the toy around a bit to maintain your pup’s interest, or even try a very gentle tug. If your puppy grabs your legs or jumps onto your arms as you are walking about, you can toss the toy to create a new game. A treat toss can also be used to quickly disengage your puppy from your legs.

Another training option is to remove the value of the game: if your puppy mouths your clothing or body, become very still. Many puppies quickly notice that the game they were enjoying is no longer available. When the puppy lets go, you can resume the game using an appropriate toy.

Another version of this training technique could be called the stop-and-start method. Use a nice big toy that is larger than your hand, and only hold a small part of it. If the puppy bites your hand instead of the toy, drop the toy, fold your arms, be very still, and look up at the ceiling for 10–15 seconds. Once the puppy pauses play and calms, resume the game but keep your energy level lower to promote a gentler play style.

If your puppy does not calm when you pause, you may need to separate yourself from the puppy for a brief period. Be sure to start your play session near a doorway, so if you need to disengage briefly, you don’t have to walk far and risk triggering your puppy to playfully chase you. You will only need to take a few steps to quietly walk away, stand behind a gate or door for 10–15 seconds, and then try again.

Be Proactive

1. Schedule many interactive play sessions throughout the day with a variety of fun toys. Also schedule some reward-based training sessions to teach your puppy important cues and improve your ability to communicate with your puppy (and vice versa).
2. Provide many fun, safe toys for your puppy and rotate them so they remain exciting.
3. Be sure your puppy gets plenty of exercise. Ask your veterinarian for guidelines based on your puppy's health and age.
4. If possible, schedule play dates with appropriately matched puppies.



Be sure to provide enough appropriate outlets for your puppy's temperament and energy level: all puppies need social play as well as physical and cognitive enrichment.

Should I yelp or pinch my puppy if she hurts me?

It is never appropriate to hurt your puppy. Pain can cause an aggressive response, even in a young puppy. Aversive methods that rely on pain or fear almost always do more harm than good. Puppies may become overly aroused or overly frightened; neither of these emotional states help your puppy understand how to play appropriately. Over-arousal is commonly observed when puppies play with young children who shriek and run away when they are being pursued or bitten. It is always important to have an adult close by when children play with puppies.

If calm training techniques do not seem to be effective, instead of reaching for corrections or trying new ideas for "stopping" the behavior, it is best to consult a professional positive reinforcement trainer for coaching, as soon as possible. They will assess your puppy's learning style and play style and design a customized behavioral program.

Can I play tug games with my puppy?

Games of gentle tug with a toy can provide an acceptable outlet for pulling, biting, and tugging, rather than the clothing or body parts of people. Be very gentle, as puppies can be easily injured during a game of rough tug. It is important to briefly end the game (stop and start) if the puppy seems overly agitated or if the puppy misses the toy and instead grabs your skin or clothing.

End the session with a clear cue such as "all done" and then toss a toy or treat for the puppy to chase. You can also use the tug game as an opportunity to teach your puppy to let go of toys and objects on cue (see handout "Teaching Your Dog to Drop an Object" for details about the "drop it" cue).