

# BEHAVIOR Training

## Kentucky Humane Society

### 'OUCH!' - PLAY BITING IN PUPPIES

Play biting is one of the most common complaints made by those who are living with puppies and adolescent dogs. Why? Probably because 1) almost all puppies exhibit this behavior and 2) they have razor-sharp teeth. The level of mouthing you encounter with your puppy could be based on several things including time spent with his littermates and mother as well as his particular breed. The good news is that the vast majority of puppy biting/mouthing is not at all aggressive, but rather a normal social interaction for dogs. This doesn't mean that you cannot modify this behavior; it will just take consistency from you and your family and lots of redirecting your puppy to mouth and bite on appropriate things. (Note: If you are encountering growling or biting over toys or food or suspect your puppy's behavior to be more than play biting, consult a well-qualified professional at once.)

#### Keys to Success

- First, please remember that this is a normal behavior. Play biting is not your puppy's attempt to be bad or dominant. He is simply practicing what is a normal social skill for dogs.
- Second, it's critically important in the early months of puppyhood that your puppy learn to have a soft mouth. This is called bite inhibition. Bite inhibition means that he knows how much pressure to apply with his jaws before it hurts our human skin. At some point in your dog's life you will need to have your hands in his mouth and we want the dog to know how much pressure is too much. This means that soft, gentle mouthing on your hands should be accepted, especially when your puppy is under five months of age.

#### What to Do If Your Puppy Play Bites

- Encourage your puppy to play with appropriate toys, not your hands.
- Don't use your hands or shirt sleeves as toys.
- If during play sessions your puppy leaves the toys and bites your hands roughly/too hard, say "OUCH!" and pause play for a few seconds. Make sure your 'ouch' is in a short, sharp tone and loud enough to interrupt the biting, but not so loud that you scare your puppy. Redirect your puppy back to the appropriate toy and resume play.
- If your puppy bites too hard a second time, say "OUCH!" and stand up for a few seconds. Again, redirect your puppy back to an appropriate toy and resume play.
- If your puppy goes for your skin a third time say "OUCH!" stand up and walk away. Completely ignore your puppy as you leave: no talking, touching, etc. This method will teach your puppy that if he bites hard, then you will go away.
- If your puppy is jumping and grabbing at your clothing, handle it the same way as outlined above. Your puppy doesn't know that eating your pants doesn't really hurt you! Just redirect the puppy to the appropriate toys. Make sure that clothing-biting/grabbing is downplayed as much as possible; only give the OUCH and redirect to appropriate toys. Try not to get into tug of war games with your puppy and your pant legs.
- If your puppy is being very persistent about grabbing you/jumping on you as you try to leave, walk into the nearest room and close the door, completely shutting off yourself from your puppy. You only have to stay shut away for a few seconds to get the point across that biting you will make you leave.

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### **What Won't Work**

There are several other common practices to stop puppy biting that are sure to backfire. Here is a list of what will not help you and your puppy correct play biting:

- Grabbing his muzzle with your hand.
- Hitting your puppy on his nose/muzzle.
- Pinching your puppy's jaws/lips/tongue.
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All of these tactics have several flaws including:

- Putting your hands right where you don't want them – in/near your puppy's mouth.
- Teaching your puppy that your hand around their face is a bad thing. Your puppy can become hand-shy, making giving medications, brushing teeth, vet exams, etc, in the future much more difficult.
- Potentially scaring your puppy, causing him to fear you and/or causing him to feel like he needs to protect himself leading to more biting.

### **A Brief Note about Children and Puppies**

There is nothing sweeter: a young child and their puppy. However, when puppies are very young and in their teething/mouthing phases, the interaction between young children and puppies should be monitored closely. When young children are mouthed, their reaction is often to either scream in a very high pitched voice or slap/push the puppy away. Both the high pitched voice of a child and the pushing away are likely to be viewed as play maneuvers by a puppy, causing the puppy to come back even harder/faster as they ramp up for this exciting play session. Sometimes the children even try to run away which looks like a fun game of a chase to a puppy. It's up to the adults in the home to help both the puppy and young children handle this development phase.

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