

Pawsitive Results Critter Academy

Where people learn to lead...and pets love to follow!

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Puppy Play Biting

Why Do Puppies Bite?

Although undesirable to humans, play biting is a normal and necessary puppy behavior. Dogs are social carnivores, which means they were meant to live in groups and work together to bring down large prey. Dogs need to have extremely strong jaws in order to hunt successfully, but must have excellent control over their jaw strength so they won't hurt each other during normal scuffles over food, mates and resting places. How do dogs develop this control? It's rehearsed over and over during puppyhood through play biting! If a puppy bites too hard during play, the other puppy yips and play comes to a temporary standstill. Over time and with experience, puppies learn to use their mouths gently to keep play going. Puppies that don't get this ongoing practice may be at greater risk for inflicting a damaging bite as an adult.

Recognizing Aggression

Does your puppy bite or threaten to bite when being possessive of toys, food or chewies, or to stop or prevent handling or other interactions? This is NOT normal puppy behavior! Fortunately, this kind of aggression can usually be successfully resolved if properly addressed at an early age. Please call me to arrange one-on-one assistance right away!

Responding to Play Biting

It is important to tolerate play biting in puppies up to 18 weeks of age so that we can give them feedback about their jaw strength. This does not mean that puppies should be given free reign to bite as hard as they want- remember, this is about giving them appropriate feedback! Gentle biting should get no response from you (other than to exchange your hand for a toy), but when your puppy bites too hard, you need to communicate this in a way that makes sense to him. The best response to hard bites is to tell your puppy "Ouch!" and give him about a 30 second time out from play and interaction. For some pups, just standing up and ignoring them is a sufficient time out. For others, you will need to leave the room or take the puppy to a safe time-out area. Once your puppy is reliably using his mouth gently, you can phase out play biting completely by redirecting him onto toys and timing out all bites.

Manage That Mouth!

Working through puppy biting shouldn't leave you perforated! There are steps that you can take during this process to minimize the amount of biting that is directed at you and to make your puppy easier to handle when biting does happen:

- ◆ Provide your puppy with opportunities to interact with other puppies and puppy-friendly dogs in safe environments. Let your puppy burn some energy and get valuable feedback from his own species!
- ◆ NEVER use body parts to entice play! Puppies use their mouths when they play. If you encourage your puppy to play with your hands and feet, then you are encouraging him to bite you!
- ◆ Always have toys or chewies available when playing with or petting your puppy. Puppies use their mouths constantly- if there isn't a toy or chewie to put in it, what's a puppy to do? Chew on you!
- ◆ Closely supervise all interactions between puppies and children. Children's quick movements and high-pitched voices tend to get puppies amped up, and their reactions to being bitten (squealing, pushing, kicking or running away) often get puppies even more excited. Adults should be available to facilitate appropriate interactions and interrupt before things get out of control on either end.
- ◆ Have your puppy drag a thin 4-6 foot leash (only when supervised!) to make it easier to interrupt biting. You may be able to time out your puppy by standing on the leash and ignoring him. If you need to move him to a time-out spot, you can use the leash to take him there instead of carrying a still-biting ball of fur.
- ◆ Provide "busy toys" to help burn your puppy's energy and give his jaws a workout. There are many hollow rubber toys that you can fill with your puppy's food or treats.
- ◆ Be proactive. If your puppy gets wound up and bites a lot at certain times, engage him in an appropriate activity BEFORE the biting starts. If you can get his energy focused on an appropriate activity, such as chasing a toy or getting his dinner out of a "busy toy", you may be able to prevent or minimize the biting. You will also be teaching your puppy a more appropriate and successful way to interact with people and entertain himself.

DO NOT PUNISH your puppy for play biting! Hitting or swatting your puppy or holding his mouth closed can have unfortunate results:

- ◆ Puppy play can be pretty rough; some puppies misinterpret physical punishment as play and increase the roughness of their play to match yours. Now you have a puppy that bites more frequently and roughly because you inadvertently encouraged him to!
- ◆ Attempts at punishing play biting can leave puppies scared or confused. Puppies can become afraid to play with you, become fearful of approaching hands, and become defensively aggressive. Your puppy's goal is to play with you- punishing his attempts at play is not the answer. The clearest way for you to communicate with your puppy is to use consequences he understands: teach him that hard bites end play immediately.