Teaching Bite Inhibition to Puppies



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Bite Inhibition

Between 9 and 13 weeks of age, your puppy is likely to be a land-shark and you may resemble a pin cushion. This is normal! In fact, if you are not experiencing this, even more reason to listen up, because you need to be experiencing this. Well, technically, your puppy does.

Puppies use their mouths to explore the world; they use their mouths as we use our hands. The only difference is that they are equipped with razor-sharp weapons!

Before our puppy reaches the age of 20 weeks, we have a critical and time-sensitive job to do. We must teach our puppy how to use their mouth gently.

Now, I know. You might say “But I don’t want my puppy biting at all! How do I make it stop?” and while I understand your frustration, I promise you, this is not what is best for you, your puppy, the public, and future dog-friends.

Let’s work through a process called “Bite Inhibition Training” - this is far more important than potty training, leash walking, crate training, and any manners you have on your wish list. I promise.

In fact, it’s the best thing you can do for them. They need to learn bite inhibition in three different contexts:



1. With other puppies around the same age (under 16-20 weeks)
2. With people
3. With adult dogs who are friendly and tolerant

What do we risk by not teaching them this skill? We risk having a dog who does not have a variety of strengths of bites, from warning nips all the way up to bone-crunching bites. We need them to learn the difference and to choose the warning nip throughout their life when they need it.

“But my dog will never bite!”

We all wish for this to be true, but the reality is that all dogs bite. They bite when they are afraid, threatened, or injured. It’s not to say that your dog is guaranteed to bite, but it’s certainly to say that your dog is not guaranteed not to bite.



Teaching your puppy to use a softer mouth during play won't come back to bite you later.

Let's look at how we can bite-proof your puppy now for a lifetime of safer dog-guardianship.

First, we'll look at when biting/nipping typically occurs. Puppies can get easily overtired and overstimulated and overexcited...sending their teeth into overdrive!

When they're feeling this way, you'll generally see a tiny zooming landshark that feels a little scary to you. It might mean that they need a quieter/calmer environment to decompress, a potty break, or a nap. The only way to find out is to try one of these options and see what works.

We have to keep in mind teething can start as early as two weeks of age and continues until 6 months, but they can feel a sense of discomfort until even 12 months of age, so moderate nipping and chewing is typical and normal!

First, it's best to replace your flesh or clothing with an exciting and appropriate toy that is satisfying to your puppy. When they latch on, gently move the toy (rope, towel, stuffy, etc) into their mouth even if you have to gently pry their mouth open to release and then get that toy in there.

Make the toy animated - wiggle it and keep it nice and low. Be careful not to tug it and hurt their teeth or neck!

If they're still going after your or your clothing, you might need to be more animated with the toy and less animated with your voice. OR they might have a basic function need that is requiring attention (potty or sleep, typically).

Next, we want to allow SOME tooth-on-skin contact so that our puppy can learn how hard is too hard via consequences...not fear.

This will take some time and consistency with all the adults in the home. Children should not partake in this training and should always be fully supervised around the puppy. Remove the dog or the child from the scenario if there is nipping occurring and do so calmly and quietly.

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Week #1
• Allow mouthing and nipping
• Keep hands still and boring or offer a toy instead
• If it really hurts, say “ouch” in a flat tone and leave the LTCA (long-term confinement area) for a couple minutes or go do something you need to do - emails, phone call, laundry, meal prep, etc. Completely disengage from play.

Week #2
• Allow mouthing and nipping
• Keep hands still and boring or offer a toy instead
• If it hurts a little, say “ouch” in a flat tone and leave the LTCA (long-term confinement area) for a couple minutes or go do something you need to do - emails, phone call, laundry, meal prep, etc. Completely disengage from play.

Week #3 & onward
When playing, if your puppy bites, offer a toy instead and if they bite anyway, immediately say “ouch” in a flat tone and leave the LTCA (long-term confinement area) for a couple minutes or go do something you need to do - emails, phone call, laundry, meal prep, etc. Completely disengage from play.

Some additional tips:

Mealtime
Hand feed a small part of each meal to teach them to be gentle when taking food, using a similar system: holding one kibble between your thumb and pointer finger, offer it to your puppy. If they try to snatch it do not let it out, simply say “ouch” in a flat tone and put it behind your back for a second or two. Try again, only releasing the food to a gentle mouth.

Toys
Be sure that your puppy has a rotation of safe and appropriate novel toys that you switch up daily to keep them interested.

Punishment
Never respond to biting with punishment or corrections - we want our puppies to bite now so that they can learn how hard is too hard and default to a softer mouth or a gentler bite if they do need to use their teeth in the future. This includes holding their mouth shut, swatting or smacking them, yelling at them, shoving them away, holding them down, or forcing them in a crate.

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Puppy isn't biting
If your puppy isn't biting at all during this period (9-14 weeks, you can encourage some gentle roughhousing so that they learn this skill. Don't take a lack of biting as a sign that your puppy is "good" or "well-behaved" - biting is normal and exactly what we want and need to see during this time.

Delaying the work
Don't make the mistake of missing out on this critical exercise. Once a dog is past this age, we cannot change their ABI (Acquired Bite Inhibition). **It is for life.** If your dog does not learn this skill, we risk having a dog who bites hard when startled, or feels threatened. This is not ideal!

Children
Children under 12 years of age should be closely monitored with a puppy or a dog. Never leave dogs and children alone together. **Even for a second.** Dog and baby on the scene? Human adult is in between. Say it with me!

Children should be taught never to roughhouse with a dog of any age. Even if it seems enjoyable for both parties, it is a sure-fire way to increase arousal levels and lower impulse control in your dog when they're interacting with children.

Zero tolerance
Zero tolerance for biting at this age is not realistic, nor is it safe. We want our puppies to exhibit "normal" behaviour so we can shape it - not extinguish it until they need it...and they will. Trust in the process.

Teach "Kisses"
Smear a teaspoon of plain cream cheese or xylitol-free peanut butter on the back of your hand. Hide your hand behind your back. Say "kisses" and then present your hand to your dog. Once they've had a couple little licks, say "thank you" and hide your hand behind your back. Repeat until your hand is free of sticky food and move on.

This can be a great exercise for older kids (6 years and up) as well. (Of course, be mindful of allergies and ensure only the back of the hand is used - never the face!)

Child-safe resources
www.FamilyPaws.com
www.DoggoneSafe.com
www.LivingWithKidsAndDogs.com



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YES, I NEED THIS!

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