

Integrative Veterinary Care

Puppy Biting

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Puppies bite. They bite everything – other puppies, grown-up dogs, random animate and inanimate objects, and us. It is part of how they explore their world. When puppies bite other puppies or adult dogs, they get feedback. If they bite appropriately, play commences or continues. When they bite inappropriately, a yelp or harsher correction ensues. When they bite us, they often get confused. We are inconsistent. Sometimes we think the biting is cute and reward it. Sometimes we get mad. Sometimes we ignore it. Most people exclaim that they can't wait for the puppy's adult teeth to come in, so they won't be so sharp anymore, completely forgetting that adult teeth can rend tissue with much more force than puppy teeth.

Puppy teeth are sharp for a reason. They are supposed to hurt. The pain prompts other pack members to respond appropriately to biting, so the puppy learns how to be gentle. This learned skill is called "bite inhibition," and your pup has until he is 16 weeks old to acquire it. (Unsurprisingly, that is when most puppies begin losing their puppy teeth.)

If your puppy has not learned to inhibit his bite by the time he is 16 weeks old, he will probably never learn. That can lead to serious problems later on.

I teach bite inhibition by using the puppy's own language. He nips, I yip. A nice, high-pitched "Ow!" or "YIPE!" usually causes the puppy to take his teeth off of me promptly. (Sometimes they think they've killed me.) The puppy gets two yips with no other consequences. If I have to yip a third time for the same type of bite, a time-out follows. The time-out can simply be breaking off contact for a few seconds, or can be placing the puppy in its crate for 3 minutes or me stepping over the baby gate for a little while, etc. What matters is that contact stops for a period of time. Then you come back and let the puppy try again.

I start out yipping for the nips that actually hurt a little. Then I start yipping for softer and softer touches, until the puppy decides that I'm a wimp and am useless for that type of play. At first, there are no time-outs for nipping a new body part, as long as the puppy is trying something different. After a few days, the time-out follows any 3 yips in succession. After a week of time-outs for 3 yips, it becomes 2, then 1. It is crucial that the puppy learn how fragile people are. Sometimes, dogs need to bite – when they are in pain, or threatened. I want my dog to know how to use his mouth around people. This prevents accidental injury. My goal is to teach bite inhibition rather than to teach "you must never-never-ever touch me with your teeth."

Yip when the puppy nips anything that is attached to you as well. This means clothes, shoes, and hair. Teach him that we can be harmed by biting these things, and we will reduce the risk of accidental injury. Yelp when he accidentally bites you when playing tug, etc.

If the puppy is not just biting you but chewing on you, start with the yip, withdraw attention momentarily, and come back to him with an appropriate chew toy. Offer the toy for chewing. If he keeps chewing on you, offer a time-out. Leave the chew toy with him. Give him quiet attention for gnawing on appropriate objects.