

Teaching Pups Bite Inhibition

by Melanie Travis Schlaginhaufen

Nipping, playbiting, mouthiness---puppy biting by any name is quite common, and quite annoying. Some pups go through a short stage of this behavior, but if you have a pup past the age of 9 weeks who is still biting down on your hands, or nipping at your clothes, then your puppy needs more training on inhibiting his desire to bite.

Why should we be overly concerned about this behavior? Because in every dog's lifetime, there will be temptations to bite. It may be during the course of a bad ear infection, when it is painful for him to have his ears medicated, or perhaps it will be when he is tempted to nip a child's heels if he has herding instinct. When this time comes, we want our dog to have excellent bite inhibition—if he feels the need to use his mouth, we do not want him to bite hard or break skin.

Some dogs will “grab” as opposed to real biting. If “grabbing” happens in a dominant, not fearful context (for example, a dog who grabs the brush to get you to stop grooming him) then it is appropriate to interrupt this behavior with a calm correction. If this type of behavior happens because the dog is afraid (for example, at the vet), then correction should be minimal; but we still need to make it clear to our dogs that aggressive responses are always inappropriate. When giving a correction, always consider the dog's basic temperament. Each dog has a different tolerance level for correction, and many softer dogs will respond to a quiet but stern “stop” if their relationship with their owner has already been established. Over-correcting may damage the owner's relationship with their dog—leading to stress in the fearful dog, or aggression in the dominant dog. If you are unsure about your dog's basic temperament, schedule an evaluation with a professional.

Back to puppy biting. The most common “solution” for this behavior, written in many training books and advocated by numerous veterinarians and trainers, is to grab the dog's muzzle. I personally do not recommend this method, ever. If it is going to be effective, it will work on the first or second try, and should not have to be constantly repeated. If it has worked, the dog owner would not be calling me for advice so my clients need a different approach. Continuing with this method of holding the dog's muzzle shut, often changes a dog who engages in playful biting to a dog who escalates to biting in anger (when the owner releases the muzzle grip, the dog truly tries to bite). Also, keep in mind that dogs with pushed in faces (Bulldogs, Boxers, Boxers, Pugs, Lhasas and Shih Tzus) have restricted airways, so it is dangerous to hold their muzzles shut.

The most effective methods I have found to correct nipping and playbiting in a puppy are outlined below:

ESTABLISH LEADERSHIP. Establish the correct relationship with the dog. These puppies often do not nip the man in the family, whom they perceive as a leader who would not tolerate the behavior. Perhaps the Dad of the family gives is more consistent in his interactions with the dog, while the Mom and children give corrections that the dog perceives as nagging, not punishing. Or perhaps the dog feels safer and calmer around the leader of the family so the dog is simply less reactive around the person he assumes is the leader of the pack. Learn how your particular dog perceives leadership, and be consistent in your leadership techniques. These techniques involve simple exercises like reinforcing the down stay command. Even children as young as age 5 can practice down stays, if an adult is there to convince the dog to obey the command. The dog must understand that his position in the family is subordinate, even to the children. A good trainer can show you various exercises to reinforce leadership without frightening your dog in any way. Keep in mind that we are not trying to break the dog's spirit, so we must balance all of this with plenty of affection. Dogs, like people, trust leaders who are protective, loving, fair and consistent. This is the type of leader we must be in order to gain the dog's trust, and just as important, his respect.

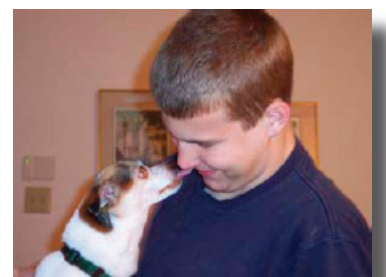
TEACH PROPER WAYS TO PLAY. Redirect the dog as much as possible. Make sure the dog has appropriate items to chew on (stuffed Kong™ toys, Nylabones™, knuckle bones, etc). Teach the dog to hold, retrieve and drop balls and toys using training methods based on the principles of positive reinforcement. If your dog is not a natural retriever, then he can be taught to retrieve using clicker training. You can find articles on how to use a clicker for retrieve work on the internet but it is even better to work with a trainer who can show you the techniques. Choose a trainer who is knowledgeable in using positive reinforcement, such as treats and clickers, to teach your dog these behaviors. A knowledgeable trainer can also teach you and your children games to play with your dog which do not encourage biting.

TEACH YOUR DOG AS MANY REPLACEMENT BEHAVIORS AS POSSIBLE. Work daily, at least two 15 minute sessions, on basic obedience exercises (sit, down, stay, come, walking politely on leash) plus the retrieve commands mentioned above (“take it” which means take and hold an object, “get it” or “fetch” which means retrieve and “give” or “out” which means drop the object.) Dogs who mouth their owners are dogs want a great deal of attention. Just like a naughty child who misbehaves when his mother is trying to talk on the phone, many puppies find negative attention reinforcing. Biting at our hands and clothes gets lots of attention. Let's teach them other, more acceptable ways of getting our attention (playing retrieve with their toys, sitting politely for attention, playing the “touch” game where they target our hand and touch us with their muzzle instead of biting to get our attention, etc).

APPROPRIATE CONSEQUENCES. A startle correction can be used to interrupt the behavior long enough for you to redirect the dog to a more positive behavior. Because the type of correction recommended is individual to each dog (a fearful dog, for example, would require a very mild correction, while a more dominant, outgoing dog might require something a little stronger), I do not give “across the board” correction techniques in my training articles, with one exception. I do correct pups that bite my hands by placing my thumb on their tongue and pressing down. I call this the tongue depressor technique. I do not give any verbal correction while doing this! I want the dog to think it is a natural consequence of his biting, so the dog will choose not to bite my hands in order to avoid the unpleasant sensation of feeling my thumb pressing down on his tongue. If you use impersonal consequence for correction, as opposed to personalized correction, then you avoid power struggles with the dog, and you lessen the chance that correction will cause aggression. A behavioral counselor can evaluate your dog and teach you other methods if needed. Using a sharp, high pitched squeal, timed immediately when the behavior occurs, will stop many puppies from nipping. Your trainer can demonstrate this for you. Noise sensitive dogs will respond well to this technique, but highly prey driven dogs often get even more excited and nippy when you squeal. Each dog is unique, and as mentioned above, the type of correction used will vary from dog to dog.

CHANGE THE ENVIRONMENT SO THAT NIPPING IS LESS LIKELY TO OCCUR.

Stop all tug of war games. Spray kids' pants and socks with Bitter Apple™ so they taste unpleasant (I have clients who even resorted to spraying the children's hands!) Don't allow your children to run in the pup's presence until the pup is totally trained and all nipping has stopped. Don't play “keep away” with your pup, or any game that encourages the chase and bite instinct. If your pup gives “kisses”, that is fine, but if she likes to nip people in the nose, then don't allow interactions like the one shown in this photo!



LOWER REACTIVITY LEVELS. Most puppies which are mouthy have high activity levels and an excessive need for their owner's attention. We need to do several things to teach these puppies impulse control, and how to calm down. The first and most important step is to make sure the puppy has the correct amount of exercise. Having a fenced backyard does not insure that the puppy is running out his energy—we need to be playing retrieving games for 20-30 minutes, or giving a leash walk of this amount of time 2-3 times daily to sure the pup is getting good and tired. A tired pup is a good pup, as far as behaving during TV and family time in the evening.

Next, teach the pup to accept massage, using the basic principles of Tellington Touch™ (there are books and videos on this method, or you can find articles on the Internet.) It is helpful to give the puppy something to chew on during the massage, like a stuffed Kong™ so that he is not mouthing our hands. Once the pup learns how to relax, massage can make a big difference in lowering the hyperactivity level. Last, we take a good long look at the pup's diet and supplements to make sure they are agreeing with him. Some dogs do better if put on an adult kibble that has more natural preservatives, rather than a high protein puppy performance food (we have seen good results with Sensible Choice Chicken and Rice Adult, and Nutro Natural Choice Lamb & Rice Adult). Other puppies, particularly those who show some signs of carbohydrate or preservative intolerance (such as frequent tummy upset, gas or itchiness) do best on a more natural diet, along with the proper supplements. For more information on this subject, a good website reference is www.auntjeni.com. During a behavioral consultation, we can direct you to other books and websites on this subject, and also discuss supplements which have a calming effect. I am not a veterinarian or a nutritionist; my recommendations on diet, supplements and medication are all based on what I have seen in over 25 years of experience. Things such as raw diets have become very controversial so I encourage every client to educate themselves on these topics and make decisions based on their own research, not on the opinions of others.

MEDICATION. Very few dogs need medication in order to overcome behavior problems, but occasionally a dog has an impulse control problem which cannot be corrected with training and management techniques alone. It is usually best to try everything mentioned above first, before considering medication. Certified veterinary behaviorists are not available in every area, but can be found through the Animal Behavior Society. Your regular veterinarian may have an interest in this aspect of veterinary medicine, or if not, he may be willing to read over material you share with him if a dog behavior consultant recommends that you consider medication. A good book to read with medication recommendations is "The Dog Who Loved Too Much" by Dr. Nicholas Dodman, a veterinary/behaviorist from Tufts University.

PRAYER. Technically this should have been listed first, as opposed to last, on our list of recommendations. For those of you who share my belief that God is a loving and powerful Father who cares about his children, please remember that God cares about everything he has created. No one loves your dog more than you except your dog's Creator. Since God loves your dog, and he loves you, he will hear your prayers concerning your dog. Most health and behavioral problems in our dogs were bred into them by men. But God is the one who can show us how to manage or fix these problems; how to make changes that will make the dog healthier and happier. Don't hesitate to pray and ask for advice, especially if what you're trying doesn't seem to be working.

A FEW LAST THOUGHTS. There are a few dogs with neurological difficulties that lessen the likelihood of changing their behavior problems. If a dog has inherited a high prey instinct, high defense drive and a high energy level, and for whatever reason he also has poor bite inhibition, then this dog may not be able to be in a companion dog home. If you see signs of this combination of traits in your dog, then please have him evaluated by a professional. Make sure the person you choose has had experience in evaluating dogs with serious behavioral problems

The author, Melanie Schlaginhausen, has been training dogs since 1976, and has specialized in solving canine behavior problems for the last 15 years. You can read other articles or her bio on her websites, www.knowingdogs.com.