

# **BITES, NIPS, BITE INHIBITION AND PUPPY MOUTHS**

It is natural for dogs to use their mouths to 'play' and to 'communicate'. This is one of their only ways of doing either with their littermates. However, when we bring them into the human/dog pack they have to learn new rules. It is up to us to teach them that their 'mouth on people' is NOT acceptable.

All pups of all breeds are naturally mouthy. Older dogs of all breeds who have never 'been taught' that different rules apply with the human/dog pack will remain mouthy. When they are pups, the dogs have razor sharp teeth that can break the skin with only minor contact...THIS IS NOT A BITE!!! When they get older, if this initial predisposition has not been modified...these same innocent incidents can become actual BITES...but, with no more malicious intent than as puppies. The problem is OUR perception, at this stage, that the dog is BITING. The reality is that they are just bigger and stronger. Of course, the repercussions to us are also worse. This is to be expected & WHY we must deal with the mouthiness immediately.

Puppies learn 'bite inhibition' from their Mom and littermates. Watch puppies play with each other or their Mom, really rough & tumble...then, suddenly one puppy squeals/yelps and there is a skirmish. Or, Mom will roll the pup over and correct them. The pups are learning what is TOO MUCH in the mouthy play. This is how they learn 'bite inhibition'...the amount of mouth pressure that can be used without causing pain or harm. A puppy learns 'bite inhibition' from their Mom and littermates from the 6th through the 8th week. If they are removed from their littermates prior to this time, it is up to the owners to TEACH this appropriate mouth pressure.

However, EVEN if a pup has remained with their littermates and learned proper 'bite inhibition', they still ONLY know to 'use their mouth' to play and communicate. So, we have to TEACH them that their mouths on us are NOT acceptable. Consider that the pups' mouths are 'their hands'. Using their mouths is all they know and it is who they are by the nature of being a dog. The pups seem to be obsessed with our hands...WHY? The reason is our hands are the major way we 'interact' with them. We use our hands to feed them, give them treats, pet them, brush them, comfort them, etc. Therefore, our hands become one of the most constant and important interactions we have with the pups.

When playing they will be drawn to your hands because they know this is HOW you play with them, pet them, feed them, etc. When your hands are out of their immediate reach, they will jump up at your hands. Because they are jumping up and 'what goes up must come down'...if they make contact with your hands, they may 'snag' your hand with their puppy teeth. They are not being aggressive or trying to bite, they are just trying to get those 'hands' to

play and interact with them. They are using their communicator (mouths) to interact with your communicator (hands). Therefore, it is up to us to help teach them the appropriate manner to play with our hands.

The best way to do this is to emulate the littermates and Mom. This means ANY time the pup/dog's mouth so much as 'touches' you...you must YELP, as if in PAIN! The pup/dog will startle eyes as big as half dollars. At this point, tell them calmly....but, firmly...NO MOUTH, GOOD NO MOUTH!!! Initially, this will have NO meaning to the pup/dog. In fact, they will almost immediately resume playing in the same manner they were playing previously. It will take numerous repetitions over several sessions before they CONNECT your 'pain yelp' with THEIR MOUTHS. You must be 100% at this, meaning you cannot let ANY instance of their mouth on you pass without reacting to it as described!!! If you do, you will only create confusion for the dog and they will likely NEVER UNDERSTAND that it is their 'mouth on you' that is causing this reaction (pain yelp) from you.

Know that the 'yelping/pain' sound you make is intended to make a point (emphasis), to teach bite inhibition and appropriate mouth contact. IF you overdo the yelping, if it occurs almost constantly when interacting with your pup...they will become 'desensitized' to the sound. The 'yelp' will cease to have any effect. The way to avoid this is to HELP the pup NOT to have as many situations that require your 'yelp'. You do this by being more careful when playing. Help them to make contact with the toy instead of your hands. Consider an infant. When you put your hand in front of their face...they will reach for your hand. But, their hand/eye coordination is not well developed. Consequently, they will miss your hand; grab your hair, your tie, your shirt, your necklace or earrings, etc. The same holds true for the pups. If you do not help them when they are playing with you and a toy, they will invariably get your hand instead. It is up to you to help the pup 'hit their mark'... the toy. You are far more coordinated than they are. Help them make contact with the proper item. This will minimize the frequency of their contact with your hands and this will minimize the frequency of your need to do the 'yelp'.

Also, we need to consider the pups' obsession with our feet. When you are walking, your hands are out of reach. They can jump up to make contact with your hands...which they will do. However, they will also be drawn to your feet. Your feet are right at their level and they are 'in motion'. I mean the feet have to be the absolute best toy ever invented for the pups!! Realize that your feet are in motion and the pup is in motion...the dogs will be constantly lunging to 'catch' this great toy. When they do this, their pup mouths and razor sharp puppy teeth will make contact with your ankles. They will snag their teeth on your pants legs, socks, and shoelaces. They are not trying to bite, they are 'playing' with the greatest dog toy ever invented...your feet!

An additional tool that can be helpful in dealing mouthiness is the [shake can](#)". You can access my [Shake Can](#) article. Remember, anything used for emphasis cannot be overdone OR it will lose all emphasis and impact. Help divert/direct

the dog's behavior to the acceptable behaviors. This will limit the need for using the shake can (or other methods) and help these methods retain their effectiveness.

Understand that pups/dogs will make mouth contact in almost any scenario, but especially in the excitement and stimulation of playing. They will go for the 'toy' and accidentally, get your hand or feet/ankles. Often times with pups or even older dogs that supposedly BITE a family member, what actually occurred is.... the pup/dog went for the toy...you zigged/they zagged and, contact!!! Also, consider that your moving hand in play sessions and your feet moving when walking can actually 'excite' the pup/dog...and, they will go for the 'moving toy/critter'...your hands or feet. This is especially true of terriers!

Again, I must stress that a pup using their mouth is absolutely normal. The only way they will know different is if YOU teach them the difference...the 'new' rules. They will learn quickly. Older dogs who were NEVER taught these rules of the human/dog pack will continue to use their mouths to play and communicate as they did when they were pups with their littermates. Unfortunately, an older dog can inflict (because of size and age) considerable damage. Additionally, they could develop into a full blown 'biter' as time goes on...IF their initially natural and instinctual behavior is NOT modified to fit the rules of the human/dog pack!!!!

This occurs because when they 'bite' us in the above scenarios, OUR sense is that they must know better!!! And because, they are able to inflict more damage/pain...we, reflexively 'slap out or kick out' at them. Well, they react normally and reflex back (self-protectively) at what just struck at them. You must understand when an older dog has NEVER been taught that their 'mouth on people' is not acceptable and then their age and size makes the behavior dangerous...IT IS NOT THEIR FAULT. The dogs are only doing what they have always been allowed to do. The only difference is that their physiology has changed...they are bigger and stronger. However, they are still the same dog YOU have always allowed to engage in these very same behaviors from the time they were a puppy.

It is crucial to deal with 'mouthiness' totally, completely, and IMMEDIATELY! The YELP process will work for puppies and older dogs. The [Shake Can](#) method can help. Have patience! DO NOT 'HIT' THE DOG...for doing what is normal to them. Do NOT slap out at them or kick out at them!! This will only elicit their instinctual tendencies. They can reflex out at what just 'hurt me...what is threatening my survival'. These are their instincts talking. Additionally, they can become extremely hand shy or fearful and distrusting of people. Instead, TEACH them, give them the chance to LEARN what is and is not acceptable in their human/dog pack. Dogs naturally learn how to survive with a 'dog pack'...WE place them in a human/dog pack where most of their instinctual 'rules of nature and survival' are different. WE must teach them what we want....It is an innate part of them

to want to 'learn how' to exist with their PACK. Give them the chance!!

Above all, be consistent!!!! Do not let even one instance of their 'mouth on you' pass without explaining this is NOT acceptable. Help your dog to make appropriate contact. Do not get upset at them for 'doing what comes naturally'. Rather, HELP them to learn and understand your human/dog pack rules. Remember the human/dog pack rules are often contrary to the natural instincts of the dogs. To their credit, the dogs will adapt to your rules.....but only, IF YOU take the time teach your dog. Above all.....be understanding, be patient, and be fair. The dogs want 'to please' us. Give the dogs the chance to learn what pleases you and what is expected of them. You will be doing your dog and yourself an enormous service.

In line with this discussion, I recommend the following applicable articles on our website:

- [Puppy Mouths](#)
- [Puppy and Your Feet](#)
- [Growls-Understanding Growl Sounds and Other Communications](#)

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