



**Nebraska Humane Society
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Play Biting and Mouthing

Why is my puppy nipping and biting family members?

Nipping, mouthing and biting in young dogs is generally a form of social play not a teething behavior. Teething is more likely to involve gnawing or chewing on household objects. When puppies play with each other, they use their mouths. We must teach our puppies that any mouthing behavior with humans is inappropriate.

The first thing you must do is provide lots of opportunity for play, without biting. Social play with people could involve fetch, hide and seek, as well as long walks or jogging. Although wrestling and tug of war games can be fun, they may lead to play that is too rough or rambunctious. Puppies need to learn bite inhibition. This is something they start to learn while with their littermates. It is one reason that puppies should not go to new homes until they are 8 weeks old and they have had time to practice social skills with other dogs. It can therefore be extremely beneficial for the puppy to have regular interactive social play periods with other dogs in the home or in the neighborhood.

How can I stop play biting?

You must provide the puppy with proper outlets for social play and exercise. Playing fetch or hide and seek is an excellent way to exert some energy. It is important to never entice the puppy to play with human hands by wrestling with the puppy. Petting is also social interaction and the puppy may want to bite your hands. To encourage the puppy not to mouth hands during petting, always offer a chew toy with one hand while you pet the puppy with the other. If the puppy should try to mouth your hand, stop all interaction, walk away from the puppy and try again in a few minutes.

Provided the dog is receiving adequate play, attention and exercise, you can turn the training to bite inhibition. One of the things that they need to learn is how much pressure from their jaws causes pain. Without this feedback, a puppy does not learn to inhibit the force of its bite. Because **all** dogs can and will bite at some time, this lesson is vital for human safety.

How is this lesson taught? When puppies play with each other, if puppy A bites on puppy B too hard, puppy B will yelp. If that does not work, puppy B will leave. This sends the message to puppy A that its bites were too hard and if he wishes to continue to play, he needs to be gentle. However, people often **do not** send this message to their puppy. In the beginning, they often allow the puppy to chew on them without reprimands and the puppy assumes that the behavior is acceptable.

Instead, the message people should send is that mouthing and chewing on hands is painful. To do this, often all that is necessary is for **all** family members to cease all play and attention immediately. This sends the message to the puppy that the bites will cause play to be terminated. When consistently administered this will often stop playful biting. This training often works for those family members that are consistent in their training. If the puppy persists, chases or immediately repeats the behavior, closing a door and walking out of the room can help to teach the puppy that nipping leads to immediate inattention.

What about punishment?

Other techniques are often suggested for play biting. Some involve harsh discipline, like slapping the puppy under the chin or forcefully holding the mouth closed. Remember, pain can cause aggression and cause the puppy to become anxious, fearful or perhaps more excited. These techniques also require that you grab an excited puppy, which is not an easy thing to do. Some puppies may even misinterpret the owner's attempts at punishment as rough play, which in turn might lead to an increase in the behavior. Physical methods are therefore not recommended.

Things to Remember:

- Play biting is a component of play behavior in puppies. Play is a form of social interaction. Realize that your puppy is trying to play with you even though the behavior is rough. Dogs are social animals that live in family groups and this kind of behavior is important for establishing relationships and trust.
- One effective strategy when the play gets too rough is to immediately end the play session and leave. Social withdrawal can be a very powerful tool. Leave the puppy alone long enough to calm down, this usually only takes a few seconds to a couple minutes. If upon your return the wild playing begins again, leave again. Although it is tempting to pick the puppy up and take him out of the room, this interaction may be interpreted by your puppy as additional play and the biting may continue as you carry the puppy to a confinement location.
- Be consistent, everyone in the family must practice the same techniques. This is often very difficult for children under 10 to do correctly. Their instinct reaction is to push the puppy away, which to the puppy seems like a fun game. Adult supervision with children and puppies is necessary to be effective in stopping play biting.
- Do NOT use physical punishment. This will either encourage the puppy because he thinks that you are playing or it will cause the puppy to become fearful of you and cower or respond aggressively.