



NORMAL PUPPY BEHAVIOR: NIPPING AND BITING

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Why Do Puppies Nip?

Since puppies are born without hands, the only way they have to explore the world is with their mouths. And you may have noticed that your puppy is quite the explorer. Everything goes into those little mouths, including your fingers, and those baby teeth are like little needles. Ouch!

It's completely normal for puppies in their litters to bite each other in play. When they engage in this "bitey-face" game, they learn a little about how to inhibit the strength of their biting. If one puppy bites another too hard, that puppy probably will yelp and stop playing. If that happens enough times, the biter learns to apply less pressure.

But puppies are covered with fur and we're not. The same level of bite pressure that is appropriate during puppy play can hurt us and even break the skin. The inhibition they learn in the litter helps, but it's usually not enough to teach young puppies how to properly interact with humans.

How Do You Stop the Nipping?

Some trainers will recommend that you hold your puppy's mouth closed, yell "No," or even push their cheeks into their teeth so that they hurt themselves. If you look at it from your puppy's point of view, this may teach them not to nip, but it also teaches them not to trust. They're not being malicious when they nip you, they are simply doing what they are instinctively programmed to do. There are much better ways to deal with it that don't involve hurting your puppy and making her fearful of your hands coming near her face.

When puppies are biting us in play, it's because they are trying to interact with us in the only way they know how. What they want out of the behavior is for us to interact back. If you're saying, "No, don't, stop, cut it out!" and moving your hands all around to stay out of their reach, to the puppy you're simply playing back and encouraging them to go after those flying hands. They don't understand your words and moving targets are for chasing. The message you want to give your puppy instead is, "When you nip me, I will immediately STOP interacting with you."

Try a sharp yelp, a sound that unmistakably means, "Ow, that HURT!" Many puppies will stop and draw back when they hear that sound. It may only be a second before they come right back at you, but if you get even a momentary hesitation, the message is being understood. Some puppies respond to a yelp by biting harder because these pups interpret it as a "squeaky toy" game. If you do not get that momentary hesitation or your pup seems delighted by the sound, don't use the yelp.

Stop playing immediately. Don't wave your hands around, but do remove them from your puppy's reach. When your pup is calm, you can slowly offer one hand to her mouth. At this point many puppies will lick the hand. This, or any behavior that is NOT biting, should be rewarded with continued attention. But if you get another nip, yelp (if that works for your pup) and this time move away from your puppy altogether. Let her know "that behavior doesn't get my attention, it makes me go away."

This is not something that your puppy is going to learn right away. She is biting because it is something she was programmed to do. At birth it's as unconscious a behavior to her as breathing. She has to learn first to connect to it as a voluntary behavior that she can control. That's why the initial pull-away after the yelp is often followed by another nip (if your hands are within nipping distance). It will take a lot of consistent repetition before your puppy is able to get to the stage where she lunges to nip, but inhibits herself before making contact.

Children and Ankle-Biting

It's hard for young children not to squeal, dance, wave their hands around and run when puppy is nipping at them. This, of course, delights the puppy and encourages her to continue her "playing." In this case, or if your puppy is persistent and continues to nip at your ankles when you walk away from her, let her drag a leash in the house (when supervised). After a nipping incident, you can tether the leash to a doorknob and walk out of her reach, or bring your children out of her reach. When she has calmed down, slowly and calmly approach and offer a hand for a lick. Licks (or non-biting behavior) get praise and continued attention. Nips make the people go away again. Make sure to supervise children so that they don't turn this into a rousing "tag" game, winding the puppy up and frustrating her! Movements away from her must be immediate and smooth, and movements towards her must be calm and purposeful.

No Rough-Housing With Hands!

The most important thing you can do when your puppy is a little land-shark is to make sure that nobody in her world is rough-housing or wrestling with her with their hands. If this is happening, then no matter what else you do you are confusing her with a game that in essence tells her, "Go for my hands!" Most puppies love to rough-house, and you can still do it. Just substitute a toy for your hands. While she's going after the toy if clumsy puppy misses and nips your skin or clothing, you can yelp (if that works for your puppy), drop the toy and stop playing. That will also help teach her to be more careful with her mouthing.

The Bottom Line

If you do absolutely nothing, chances are your puppy will outgrow this stage on her own. But if you are consistent, persistent and patient, reinforcing calm behavior and withdrawing attention for mouthy behavior, you may survive your dog's puppyhood with less tooth marks!