

NIPPING IN PUPPIES

NIPPING IS NORMAL

Ouch! Your puppy's teeth are sharp, aren't they? Puppy teeth need to be sharp. These are the only defense this clumsy, tiny creature, chubby, tiny creature has! Unfortunately, your pup's needle-like teeth also jab into your skin when your puppy plays, or should your pup show a more aggressive side. Your pup has to evaluate each individual, dog or person, to learn their relative social ranks. It's part of the normal feedback that pups need to find their position in the pack and to learn about their own individual abilities.

Puppies are born only knowing how to be a puppy with other puppies! You puppy has to learn how to behave with people. This takes time. Puppies have to learn how to defend themselves and how to control their bite in play. It's all part of being a puppy. Puppies normally nip at each other or at their mother. If their nipping earns a squeal, they will learn to relax their bite with a playmate. If the nip triggers a reprimanding growl from their mother, they will likely not nip her again.

The reaction your puppy gets from you determines much of the behavior you see now and into the future. Keep in mind that puppies nip because they can, and because they are learning to interact with world around them.

We can't stop puppies from being puppies, but we can teach them how to behave as civilized pets. This is a gradual process. Don't expect your pup to behave perfectly right away. Like any young creature, juvenile behaviors evolve over many months with patience and guidance into more desirable adult patterns.

DOUBLE STANDARDS

Here's something to think about. In raising our dogs to become ideal companions, we actually ask them to learn a double standard of behavior. Your pup must learn to behave one way with people, and another way with other dogs. It's okay for puppies to nip and chase and wrestle with each other. It's not okay for puppies to behave toward people the way they would another dog. It is up to you to guide your pup along with consistent guidelines toward what you consider to be desirable behavior. This should be balanced with frequent opportunity to be a dog with other dogs, and lots of ways to channel all that normal, healthy energy on a daily basis.

PREDICTABLE RYTHMS of ACTIVITY

Does your puppy get a crazy look on his/her face just before she/he goes into overdrive? Can you tell that your pup is about to pounce on something, anything, as if driven by some internal force to do mischief? What time is it? You have a valuable clue to curb your pup's nipping and playful agitation. Keep a diary or log of your puppy's rhythm of activity over the course of a day. Your pup will likely be most active first thing in the morning, sporadically through the day, and again in the late afternoon. Your job is

to schedule appropriate activities to coincide with your dog's need to exercise and social play. If you do it right, your pup will already be at the playground with other dogs when you see that mischievous look return at its predictable time!

Get your puppy on a reliable daily schedule. A long walk in the morning is the best thing you can do to start your pup's day off on the right paw. This will help release much of the allotted daily energy. If you miss that walk, your pup will have a full tank of "gas" all day, and will be more prone to nipping and acting out of control when you come home from work at the end of the day. If you miss the morning walk, you are failing your dog and are setting your dog up for all kinds of frustration and misbehavior. Walks and the opportunity to play with other puppies and dogs are a major part of your commitment every day for your dog's lifetime.

PLAY BITING

Your puppy needs to play. Nipping is a normal part of how puppies play with each other. However, you are not another dog, and your puppy will take time to learn that double standard of behavior. It will help if you avoid games that encourage nipping. For instance, teasing games with your hands, fingers, or toes under the bed covers encourage your puppy to pounce and nip at people. Avoid games that teach your pup to chase, wrestle, or roll around with people. These games are fine with other dogs; this is another example of that double standard of behavior.

If your puppy playfully nips at you, say "No!" and push the puppy off. "No!" is not enough, however, because you are still not telling your pup what you want him or her to do instead. If you only say "No!" your pup will most likely come right back at you! So, be prepared to direct your pup's energy and attention immediately toward some other activity. For example, say "No!" and "Sit/Good Dog!" as gently but firmly press your pup's plump bottom to the floor. Then grab that tennis ball and toss it for your pup to chase. As your puppy scampers after the ball, get your dog's leash and take him or her for a walk, or go out in the yard for a fun game of fetch.

A TIRED PUPPY is a GOOD PUPPY

Commit yourself to getting your puppy TIRED! Nipping puppies usually are telling you that they need to burn off steam. Misbehavior is often a symptom that needs to be adjusted, either in your dog's daily schedule or in your response to the misbehavior. Don't wait for your puppy to act out and nip in order to get attention from you.

Give your puppy attention before he/she needs to resort to mischief! Your job is to provide appropriate outlets for your puppy's intellectual and physical energies. At least two daily walks, ideally associated with the morning and evening meals, should be quite long (45 minutes at least). Additional short walks (20 minutes) will be needed to keep your dog comfortable between meals, of course. Play time with other dogs will satisfy your dog on so many levels that it should be your goal every day to bring your pup to a play group with other dogs.

How about practicing obedience commands as an additional form of interactive play with you? This is also a great way to channel your puppy's intelligence as well as provide a bit of exercise. Practice twice a day for a few minutes at a time. Start with your puppy on a leash to help focus attention and ensure compliance.

NIPPING IT in the BUD

If your pup has had a good, long play time, a nice long walk, and a great time playing with puppy pals, but is still nipping at you, don't be discouraged. As far as puppies are concerned, a busy mouth is a happy mouth. Say "No!" to the nipping and "Sit/Good Dog!" as you give your puppy a rawhide stick to strip to gnaw on. Puppies need to chew, as do adult dogs, but puppies have developing teeth and jaw muscles so chewing is even more important.

Chewing is a great anxiety releaser for all dogs. Think of it as occupational therapy. If you don't put something in your puppy's mouth, your pup will make the decision for you, and nipping (next to property damage) is a common choice for pups who just want something to chew on. A rawhide bone is a natural, biodegradable product that most pups readily enjoy. Rawhide bones are not meant to last. Choose a rawhide that your dog can finish within a half hour or less. A quick chew may be followed by a nice snooze of your dog is just burning off those last few drops of energy in the daily "tank".

Never hit your puppy for nipping or for any problem behavior for that matter. With aggression of any kind, however, punishment is not appropriate because the fact is that the best way to guaranty aggression is to respond aggressively. Although saying "No!" is a form of verbal punishment, it is not meant to hurt your dog, just to startle him or her momentarily and declare your displeasure.

If your pup continues to nip at you, despite your attempts to distract him or her as suggested above, then you may have to meet the challenge. For young pups, grasp the pup's muzzle by encircling it in your hand for just a few seconds. Gently but firm press the dog's nose downward (you are enforcing your pup's submissive posture to you) and say "No!" Immediately press the dog into a sit position with gentle praise, and be prepared to take this dog for a walk, or offer a rawhide, for instance. Adjust your schedule in keeping with your dog's energy fluctuations tomorrow.

The MUZZLE GRASP and the "ALPHA ROLL"

If the muzzle grasp with a "sit/stay" seems to provoke your pup further, repeat it in a "down/stay", but this time do not release your grasp or let the pup rise until you hear a big sigh and the pup stops struggling. You must not squeeze the pup's muzzle to cause pain, just encircle it so that the mouth cannot open. You will need to get down on the floor with your little rascal and lean on or hold that pup down until it relaxes in surrender and submission to you. You must not bear your weight down on the pup; apply only

enough force to counteract the attempt to rise. If you allow your pup to wriggle free, dominate-related nipping could be reinforced.

One step further is the classic “alpha roll”, which forces your pup to lie on his side or back in submission and prevent the pup from rising. This is what a dominant dog (the “alpha” rank is the top dog in the pack) would do to an insubordinate pup. You need not grasp the muzzle but you should take care that the pup is unable to bite you. You might need to place your forearm or hand against the side of the pup’s neck to keep the head (and teeth) from swinging around. You must keep the pup in this position until you feel the body relax and hear that big sigh of surrender. Only then can you let the puppy stand up. If you release too soon, the pup could learn that you are unable to defend your leadership status. These versions of the alpha roll are only appropriate for young pups or for those that are small enough for you to physically control. The alpha roll is not appropriate for aggressive adult dogs or older pups.

If your pup is older than 6 months, or is very strong and very big, you may not be able to do either the muzzle grasp or alpha roll correction. Your pup will do better with more serious obedience training to curb any dominant tendencies. A 4 ft. leash and a head collar (Halti collar or Gentle Leader) will allow you to remotely bring the pup’s head into a submissive posture.

You may lose the battle, but plan to win the war. Work on preventing conflicts with your dog and not at winning interim skirmishes. Practice obedience commands twice a day in more concentrated sessions. Make your dog work for everything with a sit/stay or a down/stay. This will help you to reassert your leadership in nonconfrontational situations in which your dog is motivated to assume a submissive posture (sit or down).

Remember, it takes time to turn any puppy into a civilized dog. Be patient, but be firm. Be gentle, but be ready. Remain committed to satisfying your pup’s needs for exercise, intellectual stimulation, social opportunities with other dogs, appropriate play with people, and outlets for normal energies. Nipping will soon be a distant memory. Puppies don’t stay puppies for long. Enjoy every moment.