

## Play Biting

### **Why is my puppy nipping and biting family members?**

Although often thought to be a teething behavior, nipping, mouthing and biting in young dogs is generally a form of social play. Teething is more likely to involve gnawing or chewing on household objects. The first thing you must do is to provide a regular daily routine that includes ample opportunity for play. Social play with people could involve controlled chase and retrieve games, as well as long walks or jogging. Many dogs also enjoy engaging in tug-of-war type games, which may be an excellent outlet for play biting, providing the games are directed toward appropriate play toys and objects (see below). However, if the puppy's play becomes too rambunctious or aggressive, these games may not initially be acceptable.

Puppies need to learn to inhibit the force of their bite, commonly known as 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 7 - 8 weeks of age and they have had time to practice social skills with other dogs. In addition, after puppies have been adopted into the new home, it can be extremely beneficial to have regular interactive social play periods with other dogs or puppies in the home or in the neighborhood.

### **How can I stop play biting?**

Provided the dog is receiving adequate play, attention and exercise, you can turn your training to bite inhibition. One of the things that puppies 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 one puppy bites another too hard, the bitten puppy will yelp, and may also stop playing and leave. This sends the message to the puppy that its bites were too hard and if it wishes to continue to play, it needs to be gentle. However, people often do not send this message to their puppy. In the beginning, some owners might allow their puppies to chew and bite on them without reprimands and the puppy assumes that the behavior is acceptable. Children appear to be most vulnerable because their attempts at stopping the biting may not be properly timed or sufficiently abrupt to stop the puppy from biting. In fact a child's response is often seen by the puppy as an invitation to increase its level of chase and play. Adult supervision or a head halter for training (discussed below) should help to insure more immediate success.

The message people should send is that mouthing and chewing on hands is painful. All family members must consistently follow the rules for the puppy to understand and learn what is considered desirable behavior and what is not. However, regardless of the technique, you cannot expect the play biting to cease until you first insure that you are giving regular and sufficient opportunities for play. If the puppy begins to play bite or chew and tug on clothing, ignoring the puppy or walking away is the preferred response. Sometimes an "off" command can be helpful to indicate that social interactions will cease if the biting continues. On the other hand, playing with the puppy when it is not attention seeking, nipping or biting is the goal. In fact, all forms of play and attention soliciting behavior should be ignored, as these might escalate into more intense biting. If all family members are consistent in their responses, the puppy should quickly learn that play biting actually leads to inattention rather than play. If you teach

your puppy to sit or lie quietly before each play session, you should soon have your puppy trained that these behaviors, and not play biting, will be rewarded with a play session.

If ignoring the puppy and walking away does not stop the biting, then you will need to work on discouraging the behavior. Having a leash attached at all times during interactions and play can be an excellent means of preventing undesirable behavior, as well as prompting and teaching desirable behavior. Another technique is to emit a sharp "yip" or "ouch" as soon as biting begins so that the puppy backs off. Remember any contact with the skin should lead to an immediate cessation of play and attention. This sends the message to the puppy that the bites are painful and that biting will cause play to be terminated. Another option is to use a sharp "off" command while briefly pushing forward with the hand to back the puppy away (no hitting). Alternately, a sharp "off" and quickly backing away can be effective. Using a verbal cue such as yip, ouch or off is intended to interrupt the behavior and indicate that play and attention will now cease. This training usually works for those family members that are a little more forceful and assertive, and who are immediate and 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 biting leads to immediate inattention.

### **What if yelping does not help?**

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. Owners who cannot inhibit the puppy with a yelp could consider a shaker can, water or air spray, noise alarm, or ultrasonic device as soon as the biting becomes excessive. The loud noise or spray is used to startle the puppy, which will likely back up and stop biting. When that happens the puppy should immediately be praised and gentle play and interactions resumed.

The use of a head halter with a remote leash attached allows the puppy to play and chew, but a quick pull on the leash can immediately and successfully close the mouth and stop biting without any physical force. By simultaneously saying "no biting", most puppies will quickly learn the meaning of the command. As soon as the puppy stops and calms down, the owner can allow play to resume, as long as biting does not begin again. This is one of the quickest and most effective approaches to stop the biting and get immediate control of the muzzle and mouth, and is useful for owners that are not gaining sufficient verbal control. Remember that 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. Also remember that each puppy and each breed has a different level of intensity or a slightly different form in which play is exhibited so try and match the length and type of play to the needs of the puppy. Be certain that you are the one to initiate attention and play often enough to meet your dog's needs. If you allow your puppy to initiate play and attention sessions, then these may escalate into more intense attention soliciting or even play biting if you subsequently try to ignore the behavior. In addition, you should be able to end each session before it becomes too intense. One strategy is to use a command such as sit or down, and reward the behavior with a chew or feeding toy. Another is that if the play gets too rough, immediately end the play session and leave. Social withdrawal can be a very

powerful tool. Leave the puppy alone long enough to calm down. If upon your return the wild playing begins again, leave again. Although it is tempting to pick the puppy up and take it out of the room, your puppy may interpret this interaction as additional play and the biting may continue as you carry the puppy to a confinement location. Keep track of which types of play seem to get the puppy too excited and these should be avoided to help prevent biting behavior.

### **Can I play tug-of-war games with my puppy?**

Games of tug and pull can be a good way for the puppy to expend energy while playing with family members. In this way the puppy can be given an acceptable outlet for pulling, biting and tugging rather than on the clothing or body parts of people. In addition, the tug of war game provides an opportunity to teach the puppy to give up toys on command. However, tug of war games are only acceptable if they remain under your control, and if play biting and over exuberant behavior do not increase. Select a few tug toys for playing this game and be certain that you are the one to start each session. It might be best to keep the toy(s) out of the puppy's reach until it's time to play the game. Throughout the play session, if the puppy gets too excited or begins to grab hands or clothing, have the puppy settle down and give up the toy before allowing play to continue. Food rewards can also be used at the outset to encourage the puppy to stop the give up the toy. At the end of each tug session, teach the puppy to give up the toy and reward with a favored chew or feeding toy. If successful, this type of play provides you with a means of controlled interactive play, as well as teaching the puppy to give up the toy on command.

Following each play session, give the puppy some down time. Try and use a crate or confinement pen with object play toys (food stuffed toys, chews) that have been saved for confinement time so that the puppy can play with the toys or take a nap until the next scheduled play, exercise, training or elimination session is due.

*Debra Horwitz, DVM, Diplomate ACVB & Gary Landsberg, DVM, Diplomate ACVB*

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### Destructive Behaviour

#### **Why do dogs chew?**

Dogs, especially puppies, are extremely playful and investigative. While play with people and other dogs is an important part of socialization and social development, exploration and object play are important ways for dogs to learn about their environment. Therefore it is a normal behavior for puppies to investigate their environment by sniffing, tasting and perhaps chewing on objects throughout the home. Dogs that chew may also be scavenging for food (as in garbage raiding), playing (as in the dog that chews apart a book or couch), teething (dogs 3 to 6 months of age that chew on household objects), or satisfying a natural urge to chew and gnaw (which may serve to help keep teeth and gums healthy). Some dogs may chew because they receive attention (even if it is negative) or treats from the owners each time they chew, but by giving attention, the owners are inadvertently rewarding the behavior. Chewing and destructive behaviors may also be a response to anxiety. Dogs that are confined in areas where they are insecure may dig and chew in an attempt to escape. Dogs that are in a state of conflict,

arousal or anxiety, such as separation anxiety, may turn to chewing and other forms of destructiveness as an outlet.

### **How can chewing be treated?**

First, determine why the dog is chewing. If the dog is a puppy or young adult dog that is chewing a variety of objects in the household, it is likely that play and investigation (and perhaps teething) are the motives.

Dogs that raid garbage and steal food off counters are obviously motivated by the presence and odor of food. Dogs that chew at doorways or the doors of a cage may be attempting to escape confinement while others may be chewing as an outlet for anxiety. Determining the cause and motivation for chewing is essential in developing a treatment strategy. One of the best ways to determine why the dog is chewing and how the behavior might be resolved is to keep a diary of the pet's daily activities to determine when and where it is chewing, what occurred immediately prior to the behavior and what do family members do when they catch the dog chewing. In addition, the diary can help to determine whether the dog's daily schedule provides enough enrichment and a regular routine that serves all of the dog's needs. Although the goal of treatment is to stop undesirable chewing, the focus should be on providing sufficient enrichment and outlets and in rewarding desirable behavior. If the chewing occurs while you are gone, setting up a videotape may help determine if anxiety is the cause of the behavior.

Directing the chewing into appealing alternatives, providing sufficient play and exercise, and preventing inappropriate chewing are needed for the exploratory dog. You must also ensure that you are not inadvertently rewarding the behavior. Ignoring the dog, or using a device to interrupt the chewing may be useful for these dogs. With puppies, this behavior may decrease in time, provided you provide enough daily play and exercise and you direct the chewing to proper outlets. Dogs that are garbage raiding or food stealing need to be treated by supervision, prevention (by keeping food inaccessible) and booby-traps, since the behavior itself is self-rewarding. Dogs that are destructive when trying to escape from confinement must learn to become comfortable and secure in the cage or room where they are to be confined. In some cases, a new confinement area may have to be chosen. Dogs that are destructive due to anxiety will need to have the cause of the anxiety diagnosed, and the problem appropriately treated.

### **How can proper chewing be encouraged?**

Before considering how to discourage inappropriate chewing, you need to provide some appropriate outlets for your dog's "needs," not only the chewing but also all of its requirements for physical exercise, social and object play and exploration.

To get your dog's chewing headed in the right direction, begin with a few toys having a variety of tastes, odors, and textures to determine what appeals most to the ' ) pet. Coating or stuffing toys with liver or cheese spread, peanut butter, or bits of food may also increase their desirability. There are numerous durable rubber toys that are designed to be stuffed or filled with food or treats, which your dog will then need to chew or manipulate to obtain its "rewards". There are even flavored products that have been designed to stuff into the toys. Placing soup, meat products or canned dog food into the toys and freezing them can make them retain their interest and last a lot longer. In fact, if you are looking for ways to keep your dog occupied and amused when you cannot play or supervise, then it might be useful

to provide some or all of your dogs' meals inside these feeding toys, so your dog can work (and play) for its food.

Another option that might help reduce your dog's undesirable chewing, as well as helping maintain healthy teeth and gums, is to provide toys, food and treats that are designed to promote good dental hygiene. Although some dental foods and treats contain ingredients that help to reduce tartar; the ones that are likely to be the most beneficial to the dog with a need to chew are the ones that have a texture, consistency and size that encourages chewing and gnawing. Food and treats that are soft, small enough to be swallowed whole, or break apart with little or no chewing, are less likely to satisfy the chewing need.

To ensure that your puppy is encouraged and rewarded for chewing on its own toys, and discouraged from chewing on all other objects, it must be supervised at all times. Whenever supervision is not possible, you should prevent access to any object or area that might be chewed, other than the pet's toys.

### **How else can my dog's chewing activity be reduced?**

In addition to providing ample opportunity to explore and play, you should insure that your pet has a regular (predictable) daily routine that provides social activity times, where the pet gets play, training and exercise and an opportunity to eliminate. For many dogs a daily walk can be very calming and provide exercise and activity. In between these social times, especially if the owner cannot supervise the pet will need to be placed in its bed, crate or room for a nap, or placed in a room or confinement area where it has appealing feeding, play or chew toys.

Many of the breeds obtained as family pets have been bred for a variety of working tasks. This means that they are mentally and physically capable and "programmed for" activities such as retrieving, herding, hunting or sledding. Therefore the requirements of these breeds should be met by providing either work or an equivalent amount and type of play. Games such as tug-of-war, retrieving, catching a ball or Frisbee, jogging, pulling a cart, flyball, or even long walks are excellent alternatives for expending energy, while socially interacting with family members. However, the type and amount of play may vary with the breed, age and health of the pet. Obedience training, agility classes and training your dog to a few simple commands and tricks are not only pleasant interactive activities for you and your dog, but they also provide some stimulation and "work" in the dog's daily schedule.

### **How can I stop the chewing on household objects?**

Access to all areas that the dog might chew must be prevented unless the owner is present to supervise, or the area is effectively booby-trapped.

Your dog can only be punished for chewing if it is caught in the act. Even then, punishment must be humane, immediate and effective. Punishment administered directly by the owner can lead to fear and defensive reactions in some dogs, and may serve as a form of attention and reinforcement to others. A shake can, alarm (audible or ultrasonic), or even verbal reprimand is preferable to techniques that use physical contact of any type. A hand reaching for your dog should always mean affection or treats; a hand reaching to punish can have the opposite effect. Punishment of any type, when the owner is in direct sight, can deter the pet in your presence, but the pet will quickly learn that the behavior is not punished in your absence. Therefore, remote punishment (where the owner is out of sight while

administering punishment) may teach the dog that the behavior itself is inappropriate. A head halter and long remote leash that is pulled each time the dog chews), a water rifle, remote citronella collar or one of the audible or ultrasonic alarms may be effective. However, none of these products are practical when the owner is absent or cannot supervise. Arriving home and punishing a pet for an act that is already completed will only serve to increase the pet's anxiety.

The only way that chewing might be deterred when your dog cannot be supervised is by booby-trapping the areas where the dog might chew. To be successful the punishment must be noxious enough to immediately deter the pet. Taste or odor aversion is often the simplest and most practical type of booby trap but many pets will have to be conditioned in advance to detest the smell or taste by squirting anti-chew spray (e.g. bitter apple, Ropel<sup>®</sup>) into the pet's mouth or across its nose. A small amount of cayenne pepper mixed with water, oil of citronella or commercial anti-chew sprays may also be successful as deterrents. Alternatively, the spray could be placed on any object that the dog might chew and a fishing line can be attached from the object to a stack of empty cans on a nearby table or counter. At the instant chewing begins, the stack will come crashing down. Most dogs are then conditioned after a few events to avoid that particular taste or odor for fear of another "can attack". An alarm mat, motion detector alarms, indoor citronella avoidance units and a motion detector spray can are a few other examples of environmental punishment.

#### **What if the dog continues to chew household objects?**

Whenever you cannot supervise or monitor your dog's behavior, he or she should be confined to a cage or a dog-proof room, with any potential chewing sites effectively booby-trapped. If chewing is continuing, the underlying motivation may not have been accurately determined and the reasons for chewing should be revisited.

*Debra Horwitz, DVM, Diplomate ACVB & Gary Landsberg, DVM, Diplomate ACVB*

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