

## **The Bite Stops Here**

Puppies should be encouraged to play-bite – so you can teach them when to stop.

By Dr. Ian Dunbar

Puppies bite, and thank goodness they do. Puppy biting is normal and natural puppy behaviour. In fact, it is the pup that does not mouth and bite much as a youngster that augers ill for the future. Puppy play-biting is the means by which dogs learn to develop bite inhibition, which is absolutely essential later in life.

The combination of weak jaws with extremely sharp, needle-like teeth and the puppy penchant for biting results in numerous play-bites which, although painful, seldom cause serious harm. Thus, the developing pup receives ample necessary feedback regarding the force of its bites before it develops strong jaws – which could inflict considerable injury. The greater the pup's opportunity to play-bite with people, other dogs and other animals, the better the dog's bite inhibition as an adult. For puppies that do not grow up with the benefit of regular and frequent interaction with other dogs and other animals, the responsibility of teaching bite inhibition lies with the owner.

Certainly, puppy biting behaviour must eventually be eliminated: we cannot have an adult dog playfully mauling family, friends and strangers in the manner of a young puppy. However, it is essential that puppy biting behaviour is gradually and progressively eliminated via a systematic four-step process. With some dogs, it is easy to teach the four phases in sequence. With others, the puppy biting may be so severe that the owners will need to embark on all four stages at once. However, it is essential that the pup first learn to inhibit the force of its bites before the biting behaviour is eliminated altogether.

### **Inhibiting the force of bites**

**No painful bites** The first item on the agenda is to stop the puppy bruising people. It is not necessary to reprimand the pup and, certainly, physical punishments are contra-indicated, since they tend to make some pups more excited, and insidiously erode the puppy's temperament and trust in the owner. But it is essential to let the pup know when it hurts. A simple "ouch!" is usually sufficient. The volume of the "ouch" should vary according to the dog's mental make-up; a fairly soft "ouch" will suffice for sensitive critters, but a loud "OUCH!!!" may be necessary for a wild and woolly creature. During initial training, even shouting may make the pup more excited, as does physical confinement. An extremely effective technique with boisterous pups is to call the puppy a "jerk!" and leave the room and shut the door. Allow the pup time to reflect on the loss of its favourite human chew toy immediately following the hard nip, and then return to make up. It is important to indicate that you still love the pup – it is the painful bites which are objectionable. Instruct the pup to come and sit, and then resume playing. Ideally, the pup should have been taught not to hurt people well before it is three months old.

It is much better for the owner to leave the pup than to try to physically restrain and remove it to a confinement area at a time when it is already out of control. If one pup bites another too hard, the bitee yelps and playing is postponed while the injured party licks its wounds. The biter learns that hard bites curtail an otherwise enjoyable play session. Hence, the bite learns to bite more softly when the play session resumes.

No jaw pressure at all

The second stage of training is to eliminate bite pressure entirely, even though the bites no longer hurt. When the puppy is munching away, wait for a nibble that is harder than the rest and respond as if it really hurt: "Ouch, you worm! Gently! That hurt me you bully!" The dog begins to think "Good Lord! These humans are so namby pamby I'll have to be really careful when mouthing their delicate skins." And that's precisely what we want the dog to think – so he'll be extremely careful when playing with people. Ideally, the puppy should no longer be exerting any pressure when mouthing by the time it is four to five months old.

Inhibiting the incidence of mouthing

Always stop mouthing when requested. Once the puppy has been taught to gently mouth rather than bite, it is time to reduce the frequency of mouthing behaviour and teach the pup that mouthing is okay until requested to stop. Why? Because it is inconvenient to try to drink a cup of tea, or to answer the telephone, with 50 pounds of pup dangling from your wrist, that's why.

It is better to first teach the "OFF!" command using a food lure (as demonstrated in the Sirius video\*). The deal is this: "If you don't touch this food treat for just two seconds after I softly say "Off", I will say "Take it" and you can have the treat." Once the pup has mastered this simple task, up the ante to three seconds of non-contact, and then five, eight, 12, 20 and so on. Count out the seconds and praise the dog with each second: "Good dog one, good dog two, good dog three..." and so forth. If the pup touches the treat before being told to take it, shout "Off!" and start the count from zero again. The pup quickly learns that it can not have the treat until it has not touched it for, say, eight seconds – the quickest way to get the treat is not to touch it for the first eight seconds. In addition, the regular handfeeding during this exercise helps preserve the pup's soft mouth.

Once the pup understands the "Off!" request, it may be used effectively when the puppy is mouthing. Say "Off!" and praise the pup and give it a treat when it lets go. Remember, the essence of this exercise is to practise stopping the dog from mouthing – each time the pup obediently ceases and desists, resume playing once more. Stop and start the session many times over. Also, since the puppy wants to mouth, the best reward for stopping mouthing is to allow it to mouth again. When you decide to stop the mouthing session altogether, heel the pup to the kitchen and give it an especially tasty treat.

If ever the pup refuses to release your hand when requested, shout "Off!", rapidly extricate your hand and storm out of the room mumbling, "Right. That's done it, you jerk! You've ruined it! Finish! Over! No more!" and shut the door in the dog's face. Give the pup a couple of minutes on its own and then go back to call the pup to come and sit and make up. But no more mouthing for at least a couple of hours.

In addition to using "Off!" during bite inhibition training, the request has many other useful applications: not to touch the cat, the Sunday roast on the table, the table, the baby's soiled diapers, the baby, an aggressive dog, a fecal deposit of unknown denomination... Not only does this exercise teach the "Off!" request, but also to "Take it" on request.

Never start mouthing unless requested. By the time the pup is five months old, it must have a mouth as soft as a 14-year-old working Lab; it should never exert any pressure when mouthing, and the dog should immediately stop mouthing when requested to do so by any family member. Unsolicited mouthing is utterly inappropriate from an older adolescent or an adult dog. It would be absolutely unacceptable for a six-month-old dog to approach a child and commence mouthing her arm, no matter how gentle the mouthing or how friendly and playful the dog's intentions. This is the sort of situation which gives parents the heebie-jeebies and frightens the living daylights out of the mouthee. At five months of age, at the very latest, the dog should be taught never to touch any person's body – not even clothing – with its jaws unless specifically requested.

Whether or not the dog will ever be requested to mouth people depends on the individual owner. Owners that have the mental largesse of a toothpick quickly let play-mouthing get out of control, which is why many dog training texts strongly recommend not indulging in games such as play-fighting. However, it is essential to continue bite inhibition exercises, otherwise the dog's bite will begin to drift and become harder as the dog grows older. For such people, I recommend that they regularly hand-feed the dog and clean its teeth – exercises that involve the human hand in the dog's mouth. On the other hand, for owners who have a full complement of common sense, there is no better way to maintain the dog's soft mouth than by play-fighting with the dog on a regular basis. However, to prevent the dog from getting out of control and to fully realize the many benefits of play-fighting, the owner must play by the rules and teach the dog to play by the rules. (Play-fighting rules are described in detail in our Preventing Aggression behaviour booklet.\*)

Play-fighting teaches the dog to mouth hands only (hands are extremely sensitive to pressure) and never clothing. Since shoelaces, trousers and hair have no neurons and cannot feel, the owner cannot provide the necessary feedback that the dog is once more beginning to mouth too hard. The game also teaches the dog that it must adhere to rules regarding its jaws, regardless of how worked up it may be. Basically, play-fighting teaches the owner to practice controlling the dog when it is excited. It is important to refine such control in a structured setting, before a real-life situation occurs.

In addition, play-fighting quickly becomes play-training. Starting the games with a training period, i.e., with the dog under control in a down-stay, produces utterly solid stays at a time when the dog is excited in vibrant anticipation of the game. Similarly, frequent stopping the game for short periods and integrating multiple training interludes (especially heel work and recalls) into the game motivates the dog to provide eager and speedy responses. Each time the owner stops the game, he or she may use the resumption of play as a reward for bona fide obedience. Everything's fun!

#### Potential problems

Inhibiting incidence before force: A common mistake is to punish the pup in an attempt to get it to stop biting altogether. At the best, the puppy no longer mouths those family members who can effectively punish the dog but, instead, the pup directs its mouthing sprees toward those family members who cannot control it, e.g., a child. To worsen matters, parents are often completely unaware of the child's plight because the pup does not mouth adults. At worst, the puppy no longer mouths people at all. Hence, its education about the force of its bite stops right there. All is fine until someone accidentally shuts the car door on the dog's tail, whereupon the dog bites and punctures the skin, because the dog had insufficient bite inhibition.

Puppies that don't bite: Shy dogs seldom socialize or play with other dogs or strangers. Hence, they do not play-bite and hence, they learn nothing about the power of their jaws. The classic case history is of a dog that never mouthed or bit as a pup and never bit anyone as an adult – that is, until an unfamiliar child tripped and fell on the dog. The first bite of the dog's career left deep puncture wounds, because the dog had developed no bite inhibition. With shy puppies, socialization is of paramount importance, and time is of the essence. The puppy must quickly be socialized sufficiently, so that it commences playing (and hence, biting) before it is four-and-a-half months old.

If a puppy does not frequently mouth and bite and/or does not occasionally bite hard, it is an emergency. The puppy must learn its limits. And it can only learn its limits by exceeding them during development and receiving the appropriate feedbacks.

UPDATE:

Nowadays the OUCH has become a much softer owwww. Whereas it is important to give a puppy feedback that his bite hurt, there is no need to blow his eardrums out. The owwww need not be loud or scary, it just has to be effective. Really the owwww is just an NRM (no reward marker). Much more important is calming and settling the puppy down before letting him play bite again.

Bite inhibition training comprises four stages:

1. Say owwww and calm/settle pup after painful bites, to teach no pain.
2. Say owwww and calm/settle pup after harder bites, to teach no pressure, so that biting becomes mouthing. And then the final two stages focus on decreasing the frequency of mouthing.
3. Teach the puppy 'off' via all-or-none reward training so that the puppy learns that mouthing is OK (in fact it is necessary to develop and maintain a soft mouth) but that he must stop when requested.
4. Teach the puppy that he may never initiate mouthing without first being requested. And that he is only allowed to mouth hands only, never clothing or hair. Clothing has no neurons, hence no feeling, and hence no feedback.

Ian Fraser Dunbar lives in California and has a doctorate in animal behaviour. He is author of a number of books on Dog Behaviour and 15 Behaviour Booklets. The content of this article is explored more fully in Chapter 7 of "Before And After Getting Your Puppy" by Dr Dunbar, a very comprehensive guide to all aspects of training and socialising a puppy.