

Teaching Bite Inhibition

By Dr. Ian Dunbar

All puppies bite! And thank goodness they do! Puppy play-fighting and play-biting are essential for your puppy developing a soft mouth as an adult. Puppy biting must eventually be eliminated, however, it is essential that this be done gradually. First, to soften the force of puppy bites and second, to decrease the frequency of puppy biting. Forbidding a young puppy from biting altogether may offer immediate, temporary relief but this is potentially dangerous because your puppy will not learn that his jaws can inflict pain. Consequently, if ever provoked or frightened as an adult, a bite is likely to be painful and cause serious injury. Forbidding a puppy from biting all together also often results in a puppy that doesn't mouth his owners, but will still mouth family and friends!

Puppy's play-fighting with each other will begin the process of teaching good bite inhibition. When a puppy bite is too hard it will elicit a reaction from their playmate – a yelp and a pause in an enjoyable play session. The puppy learns that his sharp teeth can hurt and to continue playing he must be gentle! Our job as owners is to continue this learning in our puppies and teach them to be even more gentle with us.

Bite inhibition is the process of teaching dogs how to have complete control over their jaws, making sure they always use the gentlest contact. Teaching bite inhibition is extremely important! All dogs come equipped with a mouth full of sharp teeth, and all dogs, no matter how sweet have the potential to use them under certain circumstances. Even the nicest dog may reflexively end up snapping if a child accidentally falls on them, or someone accidentally closes their tail in the door. Good bite inhibition can be the difference between a bite that results in nothing more than a scare and a bite that causes serious damage. Teaching bite inhibition needs to happen when the dog is still in puppyhood, as it can be extremely difficult, to near impossible, to teach to an adult dog. Thankfully, bite inhibition is very easy to teach to our new puppies!

Inhibiting the Force of Bites: Teaching a Soft Mouth

To start with, you must teach your puppy to inhibit the force of his play bites, and use a soft mouth when taking treats or food. When you are playing with or handling your puppy they will begin to nip, we can use these nips to start teaching him that his bites can be painful! To start with, only react to the hardest of bites, the ones that are painful, and ignore less painful, softer bites. A simple "ouch!" is usually sufficient, coupled with an immediate stop in the play; remove your hands, stand up and turn away for about 30 seconds. If, upon restarting play, your puppy bites you too hard again say "owwww!" loudly and high-pitched, then storm out of the room and close the door behind you. Leave the pup for a minute or two, this will allow him to reflect on the association between his painful bite and the immediate departure of his favorite human playmate, then return to make up. It is important to show that you still love your puppy, only that his painful bites are objectionable. This technique is remarkably effective for all dogs, since it is precisely the way puppies learn to inhibit the force of their bites when playing with each other – we are speaking their language when we teach this way! Once your puppy is consistently play biting with a much softer mouth, begin reacting in the same manner described above to the hardest of his now softer bites. As the bites get softer, begin reacting to the next level of bites and continue until your puppy is mouthing very gently all the time.

The other part of this process is to teach your puppy to also take treats or kibble with a gentle mouth. This process is extremely easy. When feeding a treat, keep the treat pinched between your fingers initially so your puppy has to lick or nibble at the treat to get it. If your puppy begins chomping at your hand do not release the treat, wait until he switches to just licking, or mouthing softly before releasing the treat. If your puppy doesn't catch on quickly and continues to chomp at your hand, say "ouch!" and remove the treat completely for a few seconds before offering it again. This process quickly teaches your puppy that he only gets the treat when he is gentle! Hand feeding part, or all of, your puppies meals for the first few weeks teaches a soft mouth incredibly quickly!

Decreasing the Frequency of Mouthing

Once your puppy has been taught to mouth gently, it is time to reduce the frequency of mouthing all together. Your pup must learn that he should stop mouthing at you when you ask. To do this, we teach the "off" or "leave it" command. It's better to first teach "off" using food and once they have learned the behavior, begin to ask for "off" or "leave it" when the puppy is mouthing. To teach this, take a treat or piece of kibble and hold it close to your pup's nose, he will start licking or nibbling at it. Say "off" or "leave it" close your fingers around the treat a little, and pull it slightly away from your dog's nose. As soon as he stops licking for a micro-

second – open your hand and reward your pup. Continue this process several times and your puppy will catch on quickly and will stop trying to eat the treat on cue, when he is doing this regularly, stop covering and moving the treat. It is important that your puppy makes the choice to take his mouth from the treat, even though it is available. Once your pup has mastered this simple task, up the ante to two or three seconds of non-contact before rewarding, and increase from there. Praise the dog continuously while they are waiting. If your puppy makes a mistake and tries to take the treat too soon, simply remove the treat and say “too bad!” then present the treat again and start over. If your puppy is consistently trying to grab the treat too soon, this is a sign you are trying to move to fast and you should shorten your time and build up time more slowly. Hand feeding your puppy part of a meal daily, one kibble at a time is a great way to teach this skill fast!!!

Once your pup clearly understands the concept of “off” by consistently moving his mouth away from the food at the cue, you are ready to put it into practice. When your puppy is mouthing you, take a piece of kibble or treat out and show it to your pup as you say “off.” With all the practice you have done, and the sight of the treat, your pup will likely let go of your hand or arm and sit immediately. When he does, praise him heavily and reward him with the treat! As your puppy gets better at this behavior, you can fade out the treat and instead just reward with praise when he stops mouthing.

If your puppy doesn’t stop mouthing when you ask, repeat the same “time out” process you used when teaching him to have a soft mouth. Leave the room abruptly for a couple of minutes. Your puppy will quickly learn that when he stops mouthing on cue he gets to keep playing, and if he doesn’t he loses his playmate! In no time at all you will have a well-mannered playmate!

Summary

- Teaching bite inhibition is extremely important!
- Playing with other puppies is an important first step in teaching bite inhibition
- Bite inhibition is a two part process: teaching your puppy to bite softly, and then teaching them not to bite at all
- Start by reacting to only the hardest of bites, yelp loudly to tell your puppy he hurt you, and pause your play
- After restarting play if your puppy immediately bites hard again, yelp again and leave the room for a few minutes
- As your puppy learns to bite softer, begin reacting to the next hardest bites, until he is mouthing very softly all the time
- Hand feed kibble or treats and only release the food when your puppy is not biting at you
- Once your puppy has a soft mouth, begin teaching “off” or “leave it”
- Once your puppy knows “off” begin using the cue when your puppy starts to mouth, until the mouthing behavior is gone!