

Training Puppies Not to Bite

When people bring a new puppy home they are often confronted by problems that were never expected. Biting and chewing problems are just a few surprises they face. Many new owners think they adopted the pup from hell so they sit down and write us.

This article will attempt to explain why puppies bite and what can be done about it.

To understand how to solve the problem of a biting puppy you must first understand why a pup is biting. The first part of this article will explain this issue.

When puppies are about 4 weeks old they begin to play with littermates. This play involves physical activity games; they push each other around and bite one another. They chase one another in games that resemble chasing prey.

When pups first move into a human environment it takes a period of time, usually a week or so for them to recognize their human family is now their new pack members.

When that happens many pups act exactly like they did with their littermates. That's all they know. They bite, they chew-on family members, they chase human family members just as they did with their littermates.

That's why puppies bite hands, socks, ankles and kids. They play with their new human family just like they did with littermates. They don't know any differently, how could they? Their biting is not about aggression, it's about the games of pack behavior.

When we stop and think about it there is no reason for the pup to act differently. This was how they lived and played with littermates since being born so how can they be expected to know a different way?

Puppies need to learn how to live with their new human pack members and it's the humans who need to educate them.

This is where trouble starts with new pet owners. Puppies think they are playing with new friends and humans think the puppy is being aggressive.

Prey Drive

Prey drive is the genetic instinct many dogs have to chase. Some dogs have a higher levels of prey than others. Dogs with a lot of prey are the ones that really enjoy chasing balls; toys; kids and pant legs.

I have talked extensively about prey drive in my DVD's and my other articles. When puppies chase balls or run after sticks or bite your pant legs this is an example of prey drive not aggression. When a handler takes the dog's collar and tries to force it into a dog crate and the dog turns and tries to bite - this is aggression - either fear based or something else.

Now with this said, puppy teeth are very sharp little pointy things that HURT. In fact they can cut fingers and ankles if they latch on and you jerk your hand or leg away.

It's our job to teach our pup that biting us is not acceptable behavior. It's our job to show the puppy an alternative behavior that satisfies the puppies drives to bite. There are a number of ways to do this.

Which method you use is a personal decision.

Twenty five years ago I used to tell puppy owners to just grab the little buggers and shake them until they scream. This works but I have come to learn there are better ways. The problem with this is this can often squishes the pups prey drive (which we use in training) and damage the bond between the dog and the owner.

People that are involved in dog sports or people who want to do more advanced obedience and protection training need to preserve and build prey drive.

So there are a number of approaches to control biting.

When littermates play with one another and one gets bitten too hard it screams. This screaming is their way to communicate that the play biting is too rough. So there are times a human screaming is enough to teach the pup that what they are doing is unacceptable.

If the pup lets go then you can praise it with a soft pat and “good boy.” Give him a food treat or a high value toy to play with. Just don’t overdo the praise because this can often put the pup back into prey drive and the biting will start all over again.

I am currently raising my puppy in an ex-pen right next to my desk in my office. He is laying in it as I type this. I also have a dog crate over near the wall and he sleeps in that at night. When I take him out of the ex-pen I always have a toy and my bait bag on me. I am always prepared to give him the toy if he gets to wild and starts to chew on my legs or arms. I use the food treats to trade for the toy when I want it back.

I never take my pup out without a toy and I rotate toys to keep his interest. I make sure the toys are softer toys the dog likes. The toys I use to redirect the pup from biting me are not the same toys that I leave in the exercise-pen with him during the day. The only time he gets these are when I take him out of the pen.

I have hooks on my wall by the door to my office and the toys are always there.

You can redirect the puppy by either tossing it a foot or two (not too far) or move it around in front of the pup in a manner that builds interest. You will learn through experience how to redirect your puppy off of you and onto the toy.

Once you get a pup to redirect onto a toy you are on the road towards teaching that puppy that there are more interesting prey items than your hands and legs. New owners need to learn how to play tug with their puppies. Once you learn the game of tug you will also learn how to teach the dog to OUT the tug when you want it back.

Pet owners are often mistakenly told “YOU SHOULD NEVER PLAY TUG GAMES WITH YOUR PET” because it makes your dog (puppy) possessive and aggressive. This is simply not true. When the game of tug is done correctly it becomes a tool that can be used in obedience training or agility training or one of the biting sports.

To increase the value of your toys the dog need to understand that all toys are YOUR TOYS and not HIS TOYS. He learns that you allow him to play with YOUR TOYS if he behaves correctly. As I said, dogs and puppies need to learn to SPIT OUT the toy when told to do so and they need to learn to bring the toy back to you when you throw it. These are trained behaviors that are extremely important because it eliminates the dog becoming possessive of the toys.

Your Puppy Needs Exercise

There are always going to be some puppies that are driven. These are extremely high drive pups that run around like the energizer bunny. They act as if there is no tomorrow. Puppies need exercise and a couple of good long walks (NOT RUNS!!!) per day really help.

When we have our pups in the house and out of the ex-pen they are always on leash. In fact they are never off leash until they are old enough to be trained to come when called in the face of distractions. This is usually around 9 months.

I am lucky I can take my pup outside every hour or so and for a couple of walks a day. The more exercise he gets the less he wants to bite me.

Exercise Your Puppy's Mind

Exercising your puppy's mind is just as important as exercising his body.

We have found the best way to do this is with marker training - operant conditioning. It's 100% motivational and is the best way we have seen to form a bond with a dog.

We also start all of our puppies by training with food. This is the foundation of all dog training. When this is done correctly it becomes mental exercise your dog and is an art form.