



Banbury-Bedrock Bull Terriers

Puppy Biting & Teaching Bite Inhibition: Help! My Puppy is Driving Me Crazy!

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What is Puppy Biting?

Puppy mouthing and biting are normal behaviors in a developing puppy. Mouthing and chewing are some of the tools your puppy uses to explore his world. After all, he can't pick things up with his paws! Puppies can and will grab and nip when playing or when over-stimulated. As their excitement increases, they mouth and grab harder. We need to teach them socially appropriate behavior.

Typical puppy biting can get out of hand if not managed properly. Rough play, vigorous petting, high-pitched voices, squealing, and jerky or quick movements can over-stimulate a puppy and make things worse.

Do not play roughly with your puppy (or allow others to do so), even if you have no problems stopping puppy biting. Your puppy will learn quickly that rough play and play biting are OK unless someone is able to stop him. An over-stimulated puppy is difficult to manage for many adults, and impossible for children. Rough play sends an unclear message to your puppy about acceptable behavior, and it teaches him nothing about self-control.

Children usually need help learning the self-control and skills to interact and play appropriately with a puppy or dog. Teach them to be calm and gentle. Puppies need good experiences with kids and kids need good experiences with puppies. Children should always be supervised around all dogs, including puppies.

Non-Typical Puppy Biting

Growling and or biting over grooming, handling, toys or food may not be typical puppy biting. Address the above promptly with a skilled trainer who uses non-confrontational, positive methods. If you are not sure, check with your instructor.

What is Bite Inhibition?

Bite Inhibition is the ability to control the jaws and use the mouth very gently. This is important for puppies to learn while they still have puppy teeth and relatively weak jaws. They receive their first lessons from their dam, who growls and removes access to the milk supply when they excitedly grab too hard with milk teeth while sucking. From this the puppy starts to learn that desired resources may be withheld as a consequence of behavior. Further lessons come from littermates, and then, ideally, from socially appropriate adult dogs in the household. Controlling access to resources is the foundation for teaching Bite Inhibition with people. Bite Inhibition is one of the most important skills you can teach your dog for a lifetime of safety.

Instead of teaching your puppy not to bite or mouth at all (which may be what you wanted before reading this article), first teach her to be very gentle. She can't learn to mouth gently if she is not mouthing at all. Your goal is zero pressure: start with no painful bites.

When your puppy has learned to mouth with little or no pressure, the ultimate goal is to end the mouthing. Note that it doesn't pay to shut off puppy biting before your puppy has learned, in a multi-step process that she must be very, very careful with human skin. If she was well-socialized with her dam, litter and other adult canine teachers, she learned to be "dog gentle." However, dogs have far tougher skin than humans. Now she must learn to be gentle with people.

Teaching the Rules: How To Do It

The rules of touching human skin with the mouth must be clear, consistent and kind for the puppy to understand and learn. Focus on acceptable behavior. Read on to see how to reward your puppy when he gets it right and how to instantly end his fun when he gets it wrong.

When Your Puppy is Gentle

Play with him nicely, pet him gently, and praise him for any gentle mouthing or licking. He has to know what's right to distinguish right from wrong. He gets attention and other things he likes for doing what's right. If he starts to get excited, offer a toy as an acceptable alternative before he nips.

When Your Puppy Bites or Nips

The instant he gets too rough with his mouth, stop all attention. Leave him and the area or room immediately. Cut him off from social contact. Don't even look at him. The message is "I won't have anything to do with you when you act like that. I won't even acknowledge that you exist."

He won't understand you if you say that to him, AND he will be getting all kinds of attention for his biting behavior.

Show, don't tell. Everyone in the area must leave. If anyone remains with the puppy, he may escalate his efforts to get attention, even if you are reprimanding him. If he succeeds, you are responsible! You have trained him to behave worse, because it worked to get attention. When a pup wants attention, negative attention is better than no attention. Removing all attention is an effective way to let your puppy know what behaviors are not acceptable. It gets the message across without yelling, or physical punishment.

Leave your puppy alone and ignore him for a short time. Thirty seconds may be enough, two minutes is a maximum. Then come back and give it another try. Have him sit (or perform a known behavior), then reward with low-level play. He needs many chances to get it right, and to get the attention he wants through gentler behavior.

You should see a decrease in the severity of the biting very quickly. Do remember that puppies do not generalize well and he will need to learn variations of the lesson in new places, with different distractions and with new people. As he learns, you will react and withdraw attention for decreasing amounts of pressure until your puppy reaches your goal of mouthing with no pressure.

With some puppies, a low, gruff “OUCH!” (not a yelp) as they bite too hard will help to mark the wrong behavior as you withdraw your attention. If your puppy gets wilder, try a quieter but still firm “Enough” as the signal that you are ending the fun instead.

Please help children. It is unrealistic and unfair to expect them to do this on their own. Puppies tend to regard children as littermates and children tend to move (and squeal) in ways that over-stimulate puppies. Adults are responsible for setting puppies and kids up for success.

At times, puppies (like kids) are too overtired to calm down. Your puppy may need a rest period in his crate to settle. This is a temporary solution - work on the mouthing behavior another time.

Accept Less Mouthing

Once your puppy is consistently licking and mouthing with no pressure, the frequency is likely to decrease by itself. The next step is to end the mouthing behavior. Anticipate! Redirect your puppy to a toy before she puts her mouth on you. Don't wait for her to make the mistake. Reward her when she takes the toy; withdraw your attention and the toy if she mouths you. At this point, you may not have to leave the area, but withdraw all attention by removing eye contact, standing up and turning away. You will start to recognize the situations that can over-stimulate your puppy. At times, simply petting her may start the wild wiggle that ends in mouthiness.

Chewing, Training, Socialization & Exercise

Your puppy needs appropriate chewing outlets she has a tremendous need to use her jaws. Daily, supervised chewing time with marrow bones will help meet that need as well as helping tire her out and helping with the process of teething.

Your puppy may need more mental stimulation - bored puppies can have a lot of fun with a game (puppy biting) that makes their humans act like big squeaky toys. Short training sessions are great mental exercise, plus you are teaching your puppy behaviors that get her the attention she craves.

Try teaching her to carry a toy - if she is carrying a toy, she can't be mouthing a person. Give her a suitable outlet for a natural behavior. Let her know how much you approve of the carrying behavior rather than focusing on the mouthing behavior you don't want. Fetch is another good game.

Make sure that your puppy attends a puppy kindergarten and socialization class that teaches with positive methods and provides appropriate playtime with other puppies. Continue her canine education outside of puppy class by arranging regular play dates with socially appropriate adult dogs. Good canine “teachers” will have a history of interacting well with puppies. They will play with your puppy, and will be firm but not harsh when the puppy is over-stimulated.

Some puppies do a lot of biting because they need more physical exercise. The reverse is also possible - puppies can get too much exercise or activity and have trouble settling because they are always wound up and ready to go. If you are not sure, check with your instructor.

Manage for Success!

Make it harder for your puppy to get it wrong: restrict his access to the house so he can't chase and grab. Play with him in his gated-off, puppy-proof area. Make it easier for him to get it right.

Why Not Punish?

Lots of books will tell you punishment is OK, so why not: correct your puppy verbally in no uncertain terms, force and hold his mouth shut, pinch his lip, smack him, shake him by the scruff of the neck or toss a shake can at him? Here are three reasons why not.

First, there is a very real possibility that the puppy will get wilder and bite more when punished. This is a common puppy reaction and very frustrating for owners who are trying to do their best.

Second, the puppy can learn that hands are frightening and cause pain. He can learn to be afraid of sudden noises and that people, including his beloved owner, can act in unpredictable and untrustworthy ways. Such puppies may become hand-shy and noise sensitive at a time in their lives when they need to be socialized. Puppies who are hand shy or noise sensitive are more stressed by routine grooming, meeting new people, vet visits and more. You don't have to hit a sensitive puppy to make him hand shy - for some individuals grabbing and forcing a muzzle shut will start the process.

Third, what if it works? What if your puppy never bites again after one of these punishments? Is this a perfect fix? No way! How is he going to learn Bite Inhibition - to be gentle with his mouth?

Congratulations!

Teaching your puppy the rules of Bite Inhibition is one of the very best things you can do for your puppy. You are dealing positively with a behavior that is driving you crazy. You are training for future safety. You are teaching one of the many lessons of self-control that your puppy needs to learn in order to be a good canine citizen. Finally, your puppy is learning that you are a leader to be loved, respected and followed because you control access to the things he wants and you provide clear, consistent and kind rules for how to get those things.

Learn more about puppy biting and puppy socialization from:

Before and After Getting Your Puppy, by Dr. Ian Dunbar

New World Library, 2004

Available from <http://www.dogwise.com/>

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