



## Cotswold Animal Hospital

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## Puppy – 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 (See handout on '[Training Dogs – Enrichment, Predictability and Scheduling](#)'). 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.



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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. (See our handout '[Training Dogs – Play and Exercise](#)' for additional information).

### 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 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."**

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.

"Social withdrawal can be a very powerful tool."

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 its 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 (see '[Training Dogs – Enrichment, Predictability and Scheduling](#)'). 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.

*This client information sheet is based on material written by: Debra Horwitz, DVM, Diplomate ACVB & Gary Landsberg, DVM, Diplomate ACVB*

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