



"Mouthing" & Nipping in Puppies

When puppies play with each other, they use their mouths to explore their world...this is one of the biggest tools puppies have, not only for vocalisation, but to touch and feel.....and to test their limits! Think about a litter of puppies playing.... They rough and tumble, they bite, nibble and bark. If one puppy bites another too hard, the bitten puppy lets out a screech which is usually successful in getting the hard nipper to stop. This is how they learn.

Unfortunately, the way a puppy plays with its litter-mates, is usually the way it will play with you. Puppies may usually want to nip or "mouth" hands during play or when being patted. With young pups, this is rarely aggressive behaviour in which the intent is to do harm, however if this behaviour is not inhibited from a young age, the result might be an innocent but nasty bite from an older dog with a stronger jaw. Contrary to what you may hear, the pup will not grow out of this habit.

First (and preferred) Option: Encourage Acceptable Behaviour

Redirect your puppy's need to use his mouth onto acceptable objects by offering it a small rawhide chew bone or other type of chew object whenever you pat it. This technique can be especially effective when children want to pat the puppy. As you, or the child, reach out to pat the pup with one hand, offer the chew object with the other. This will not only help your puppy learn that people and patting are wonderful, but will also keep his mouth busy whilst being patted. Alternate which hand does the patting and which one offers the chew object.

NB: The patting should be kept to short periods of time, as the longer the pup is patted, the more likely it is to get excited and start to mouth or nip again.

Second Option: To Discourage Unacceptable Behaviour

Here are a few tried and tested methods for those more persistent nippers!!

1. You must teach your puppy to be gentle with hands and that mouthing/nipping results in unpleasant consequences. Teach your puppy that nipping "turns off" any attention and social interaction with you. After a nip, look at the puppy in the eye and let out a *screechy* "OUCH" as though you've been mortally wounded, then ignore the pup for a few minutes. Leave the room if you must, but ignore for a while until your puppy is calm, then try the chew bone and patting method again.
2. A second alternative to discourage nipping and mouthing hands is done by **loosely** holding your puppy's lower jaw between your thumb and forefinger after it's taken your hand into its mouth. **Do not** hurt the pup by squeezing hard, simply gently hang on so that wherever his mouth goes, your hand goes too. This will quickly become tiresome and annoying and your pup will eventually try to pull away. After several seconds, release and continue to offer your hand. If he licks or ignores it, praise, pat and offer a tidbit. If your puppy closes his mouth on your hand again, repeat the procedure

3. A third alternative is to smear *Dencorub* or bitter apple over your hands. Both have an unpleasant taste and are non-toxic. In this way, your puppy will learn that “hands in mouth = bad taste”. For this method to work, your hands must be smeared with the substance each and **every time** your puppy “mouths” until he gets the message.
4. A fourth alternative is to use a squirt bottle filled with water. Each time your pup mouths your hand, growl “Aaaah” and squirt him with the bottle (a few times for those persistent pups). This method is for those “die hard” nippers only and should not be used for timid puppies!!

Any of the second options can be used in conjunction with the first (and preferred) option stated above.

Do not slap or hit your puppy for any undesirable behaviour as this will result in the puppy becoming “hand shy” and cringe or cower whenever a hand comes towards him. This may also result in the puppy refusing to come to you or approach you; and later on in life, may respond in a defensive manner and attempt to bite you to defend himself.

Remember that none of these methods will be effective unless **YOU** work hard to teach your puppy the right behaviour, and this means all the members of your family **must** be **consistent and persistent** in these methods.

A Note about Children and Puppies

It can be difficult for children under eight or nine years of age to practice the kind of behaviour modification outlined above. A child’s first reaction to being nipped or mouthed by a puppy is to push the puppy away with their hands/ arms and shrill. This will be interpreted by the puppy as play and will probably cause the puppy to nip and mouth even more. Dogs should never be left alone with children and parents should monitor closely all interactions between their children and dogs of any age.

Preventing future problems.....

After all this, there are some big **NO NO’s** that will undermine your attempts to achieve what we trainers call “bite inhibition” (not to bite). **NEVER, EVER** play hand games that will hype up your puppy and encourage him to lunge for your hand or any other part of your body. **No chasing** games, especially with herding breeds as this will encourage them to nip and bite at legs and heels. The best games to play are games involving fetch and toys – make sure you teach a “give” or “leave” command so that your puppy returns the toy. To teach this, say the command and swap the toy for a tidbit of food and praise.