



Bite Inhibition -- an Essential Part of Socialization

Dogs must learn to use teeth properly as part of behavior development. By helping dogs learn bite inhibition early on, you can help avoid bite incidents involving other dogs as well as people. This tipsheet contains information adapted from articles by Dr. Ian Dunbar in the November 1999 "Whole Dog Journal" and by September Morn in the April 2003 "DogFancy."

Dogs normally learn bite inhibition by 4 and a half months of age. Dunbar believes it's the single most important thing that dogs learn. So try to teach your dogs bite inhibition by age three months and reinforce throughout their lives.

Bite inhibition is a learned response in which the dog consciously inhibits the full force of his biting ability. Most dogs display bite inhibition when they are playing together, and even when engaging in a fight with another dog. If a dog does not have bite inhibition, he could injure and possibly even kill another dog.

Puppies who are properly socialized learn bite inhibition while nursing and playing. When pups bite while nursing, the mother dog will train them by snudging up and walking away. When pups bite too hard during play with siblings, the bitten pup will yelp and stop playing with the rough pup. Or the bitten sibling might leap up and knock the rough-housing pup over with a loud bark or growl. This teaches a puppy that playtime ends if he bites too hard.

This is one reason puppies should go to puppy kindergarten or socialization class, where they can play and mouth while carefully supervised. They will learn that while gentle bites might be tolerated, hard bites will stop the play session.

People can use the same idea to teach their puppies bite inhibition.

* Sit down with the pup to play, bringing his attention to your hands. When the pup tries to bite your hand too hard, yelp or say "Oww!" firmly and stop interaction.

* Do not make your response sound like wincing or whining, or the pup may think it's part of the game. The pup needs to learn that fun stops when he bites.

* Give the pup a toy to chomp on instead of your hands or clothing. If he does not take the toy and instead nips again, stop interacting. Turn away, cross your arms, do not look back...you can even walk away.

* After time has passed, face your pup again and offer your hand. If he tries to bite, repeat the process.

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E-mail: training@pacificapet.com
www.pacificapet.com

- * When your pup is gentle, pet and praise him calmly and resume play.
- * If he bites again, say "Oww" as you did previously, and give him a 10-minute time-out. Leave the room, or better yet, place your pup in a time-out area. This area can be a separate room with no people or animal occupants, or in his crate. But avoid making this action seem like punishment -- you do not want the pup to learn to fear the crate or associate it with punishment. Time out is not the same as punishment. It is a suspension of playtime and fun.
- * As you practice, the pup will use less and less pressure as he comes in contact with your hand.
- * Keep in mind that the first goal is to teach the dog to actively inhibit the force of his bite, and THEN reduce the frequency. If you never let the pup put his jaws on you at all, when it does happen (say, an accident during which the dog's paw gets stepped on), the dog will probably react with an over-strong bite.
- * Do not tap or smack the dog's nose as punishment for nipping -- instead of discouraging nipping, this tends to trigger instinctive biting in self-defense.
- * Do not tease a pup or dog by flashing hands around his face or tapping his face. This can scare or startle the dog and trigger biting behavior, whether in play or self-defense.
- * However, as the bite inhibition training progresses, you can gradually begin to incorporate some sudden movements into your play with the dog so he learns to be less spooked by human movement. If a dog is afraid of objects, you can help desensitize him by slowly incorporating hand-held objects into play.
- * Daily grooming helps a dog get used to human touch. Teach your pup early on to allow you to touch his face and open his mouth. This will prepare him for activities like vet exams and tooth brushing. Start by gently raise the dog's lip and praise. You can also give a treat. Gradually lift the rest of his lip and examine the inside of his month.

Dunbar explains that no matter how hard you try to socialize a dog to people or other dogs, there may be times when it is not sufficient. For example, someone shuts the dog's tail in a door, or your dog is attacked by another dog. In these cases, your dog will instinctively respond by biting, whether it's out of provocation or self-defense. Whether or not your dog does damage depends on the level of bite inhibition that was established, usually before he reached age four and a half months.

Bite inhibition can be taught to a dog later in life, but it is more difficult and time-consuming. You will want to be prepared to avoid and control problems that may arise.