



Whole Dog Journal™

Teaching Your Puppy Bite Inhibition

A dog's ability or tendency to exquisitely control the pressure of his teeth develops when he's just a puppy. Learn how to help your puppy acquire this valuable skill.

By Pat Miller, CBCC-KA, CPDT-KA

Some puppies have a naturally soft bite; some joyfully shred flesh without a hint of malice as they engage in normal interactions with the humans who care for them.

It's a commonly accepted theory that puppies who control the strength of their bite in play (known as bite inhibition) are more likely to also inhibit their bite on occasions that may arise throughout their lives if/when they feel compelled to bite for real – not just in play. Adult dogs who have good bite inhibition, the theory suggests, will thus inflict far less damage if a bite does occur.

So, what determines how hard a puppy will bite? And, more importantly, is there anything you can do to help him develop a harmlessly “soft” bite?



Allowing your puppy to mouth you is the best way to teach him how to do it - only with a carefully modulated, "soft" bite. Puppies who learn this at a young age usually mature into dogs who don't cause serious injuries when (or if) they ever do bite "for real" - say, as a reflex when someone accidentally steps on them.

Reasons Some Dogs Bite Hard

There are a number of things that may contribute to the propensity of a dog to bite down hard when he bites:

- **Genetics.** As with most behaviors, there's a good chance that the amount of pressure a dog applies when he bites is at least partly due to a genetic propensity for hard or soft biting. (But don't despair over what hard-mouthed genes your dog may have inherited; it's also true that, as with most behaviors, the natural strength of a puppy's bite can be modified, at least to some degree. And the more chances a pup has to practice soft biting, the easier it becomes to modify it.)

– **Early experience.** In the first few weeks of life, a puppy learns how and why to control the pressure of his teeth. If he bites too hard while nursing, Mom might just get up and walk away, taking the milk bar with her. In behavioral terms, we'd call this negative punishment – his behavior made the good stuff go away. If he bites too hard while playing, his siblings are likely to quit playing with him. Many canine behavior professionals agree that orphaned puppies and those who are removed from their litters too early (prior to the age of eight weeks) are far more likely to have poor bite inhibition than those who learn mannerly mouth behavior through normal puppy social experiences.

– **Stress and/or Excitement.** Stress and excitement create tension, and that tension can often be felt in the mouth. Even a calm dog with a soft bite may increase the pressure of his bite when he is stressed (you can feel it when you feed him a treat). For a dog who already has a hard bite, the pain of feeding him a treat when he's stressed can be nearly unbearable.

The Four R's of Teaching Puppy Bite Inhibition

Here are the four most effective steps for building your puppy's bite inhibition:

1. Remove. When your puppy bites hard enough to cause you pain, say, "Ouch" in a calm voice, gently remove your body part from his mouth, and take your attention away from him for two to five seconds. You're using negative punishment, just like his mom and littermates. If he continues to grab at you when you remove your attention, put yourself on the other side of a baby gate or exercise pen. Re-engage only when he's calm.

2. Repeat. Puppies (and adult dogs) learn through repetition. It will take time – and many repetitions of Step 1, "Remove" – for your pup to learn to voluntarily control his bite pressure. Puppies have a strong need to bite and chew, so at first, "ouch and remove" only if he bites hard enough to hurt you. Softer bites are acceptable for now. If you try to stop all his biting at once, you'll both become frustrated. Look for just a small decrease in his bite pressure at first.

When he voluntarily inhibits his bite a little – enough so that it doesn't hurt – you can then start responding with "ouch and remove" for slightly softer bites, until you have eventually shaped him not to bite at all. By the time he's six to eight months old, he should have learned not to put his mouth on humans, unless you choose to teach him to mouth gently on cue.

3. Reinforce. Like all dogs (and humans), your pup wants good stuff to stick around. When he discovers that biting hard makes you (good stuff) go away, he will decrease the pressure of his bite, and eventually stop biting hard.

This works especially well if you remember to reinforce him with your attention when he bites gently. It works even better if you use a reward marker when he uses appropriate mouth pressure. Given that your hands are probably full of puppy at that particular moment, you might choose use a verbal marker followed by praise to let him know he's doing well. "Yes!" marks the soft-mouth moment, followed by calm "Good puppy!" praise to let him know he's wonderful. (If you praise too enthusiastically you may get him excited and cause him to increase his bite pressure again.)

4. Redirect. It's always a good idea to have soft toys handy to occupy your pup's teeth when he's in a persistent biting mood. If you know he's in high-energy, hard-bite mode, arm yourself with a few soft toys and offer them before your hands are punctured. If he's already made contact, or you're working on repetitions of "Remove," reinforce appropriate softer bites occasionally with a favorite toy.

If there are children in the home with a mouthy puppy, it's imperative that you arm them with soft toys and have toys easily available in every room of the house, so they can protect themselves by redirecting puppy teeth rather than running away and screaming – a game that most bitey pups find highly reinforcing.

Never Do These Things When Teaching Bite Inhibition

Over the years, I've cringed at a variety of tactics that I've seen or heard people suggesting for modifying puppy-mouthing. Here are some of the worst – things you don't want to do:

1. Alpha-rolls. You are likely to elicit a whole lot more biting – truly aggressive biting – as your frightened pup tries to defend himself. Don't do it. (See ["Puppies Who Demonstrate 'Alpha' Behavior \(/issues/9_7/features/Dog_Behavior_15821-1.html\)"](/issues/9_7/features/Dog_Behavior_15821-1.html), WDJ July 2006.)
2. Hold his mouth closed, push your fist down his throat, push his lip between his teeth so he bites himself, or bite him back. All of these are bad ideas. What self-respecting puppy wouldn't struggle and try to bite harder with inappropriate restraint? All the while, you're giving your pup a bad association with your hands near his face, which isn't going to help with grooming, tooth-brushing, mouth exams, or even petting. Don't do it.
3. Give a high-pitched yelp. This one might surprise you. It's in a different category from the inappropriate suggestions above, and it's often suggested by positive trainers. The theory is that the high-pitched yelp sounds like a puppy in pain, communicating to your young dog in a language he understands. But it's a fallacy to think our feeble attempt to speak "puppy" might communicate the same message as a real puppy yelp – like trying to speak a foreign language by mimicking what we think the sounds are, without actually knowing any of the words. In my experience, the yelp is as likely to incite an excited biting puppy to a higher level of arousal (and harder biting) as it is to tell him he bit you too hard and he should soften his mouth. Don't do it. A calm "Ouch" sends a much more consistent, useful and universal message, which is simply, "That behavior makes the good stuff go away."

Why We Don't Punish Dogs for Hard Mouthing

It may seem simpler, quicker and easier to suppress a puppy's hard biting by punishing him when he bites too hard. However, by doing so, you may teach him to fear you, and he may aggress back at you, creating a bigger behavior problem – and you haven't taught him bite inhibition. If and when that moment comes where he really does feel compelled to bite someone, he's likely to revert to his previous behavior and bite hard, rather than offering the inhibited bite you could have taught him. Helping him learn to modulate his bite, instead, will pay lifelong dividends.

Author Pat Miller, CBCC-KA, CPDT-KA, is WDJ's Training Editor.

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What is the "timeout" used to curb puppy biting. Playpen doesn't work for us. He climbs. :-) Kennel would, but does this create a negative association with it?

Posted by: pastorpaul@agncww.com | October 5, 2017 9:28 AM

I enjoyed your article on "Teaching your puppy bite inhibition."

However, I would disagree that doing the puppy yelp when being nipped is *always* wrong. The key thing about that

yelp is that it lets the pup make their own decision to stop biting.

During those seconds after the bite stops, the guardian should remove themselves from the situation, making playtime stop. The guardian can then return about 10 seconds later and resume play, most effectively with a chew toy (note that the 10 seconds should be enough to break the potential chain

"Bite->Yelp ->Toy = Bite gets me a toy"). I doubt a calm "ouch" will do that, and by "gently removing your body part from his mouth" (and how do you do this w/o prying their teeth apart?), you are making the decision for them.

Melissa Alexander, noted trainer, estimates that about 10% of the time, the yelp will not work, at which point, some of the methods in this article might be appropriate.

The other point is teaching a soft mouth by using a human body part. Even if this is put on cue, it still tells the dog its okay to bite a human as long as its done a certain way and when a certain word is said. If the cue is not effective 100% of the time (and what cue is?), it opens the possibility of the dog lightly mouthing a stranger. In my state (OH), if a person even thinks they are being threatened by a dog, that dog can be legally classified as dangerous and on its way to euthanasia. A soft mouth would easily qualify. Instead, teeth on human should always lead to the end of the game. Teaching a soft mouth is reserved for taking treats gently.

Posted by: xxxyyy | April 27, 2017 1:20 PM