Teaching Bite Inhibition

Purdue University Animal Behavior Clinic

Even the gentlest, most mild-mannered dog has the potential to bite. Things out of our control happen; dogs get stepped on, sometimes they become fearful and feel they have no other option but to bite. A dog that can inhibit his bite may someday bite, but not leave a mark on the person that he bites. Bite inhibition may someday save your dog’s life.

Teaching Your Puppy to Control His Bite

Puppy biting is a normal, natural, and necessary puppy behavior. Puppies have little jaw strength and very sharp teeth. Puppies rarely bite with the goal of hurting someone. When puppies mouth humans, they are trying to play. Unfortunately, their mouthing can be painful, and they need to be taught two things:

1. How to control how hard they bite
2. Humans are very fragile and touching a human with their teeth is not rewarding.

Your puppy learns how to control his bite from playing with other puppies and dogs. When puppies play and a puppy bites too hard, the other puppy yelps and ends the game. The puppy that was biting too hard learns that if he does not control the strength of his bite, he will lose his playmate and the game will end – something a puppy does not want to happen!

The first step – no painful bites

The first step is to get your puppy to stop hurting people. It is not necessary to discipline your puppy. Discipline will usually make the problem worse by

1. Increasing the puppy’s excitement level
2. Causing fear and distrust

The first step in teaching your puppy bite inhibition is to allow him to mouth your hands. When he begins to bite to the point where it is mildly painful, you may give a good “ouch”. The volume of the “ouch” will depend on your puppy. Most puppies will not need an “ouch” at all; ceasing play will be effective. Some more robust puppies may become more excited or playful by an “ouch”. Therefore, we usually recommend to simply stop play and stop giving the puppy attention. Sometimes it is useful to quickly leave the room where the puppy is located to emphasize your point – “your mouth on my skin = game over”.

The second step – humans are big babies! The second stage of teaching your puppy to inhibit his bites entails teaching your puppy to eliminate bite-pressure entirely. Your puppy should now be mouthing your hands with gentle pressure; it is now time to let him know how wimpy humans really are. When his teeth barely make contact with your skin, react as described above. Your puppy will begin to understand that humans have the most delicate skin on earth and if they are not careful, what they love the most (you and play time) will be taken away.