

Puppy Biting and Bite Inhibition

It's normal for puppies to bite in fact a puppy that doesn't bite is unusual. They use their mouths the way children use their hands and unless they learn some basic rules and how to control the power of their bite, they can get into serious trouble as adult dogs. Teaching bite inhibition will increase the dog's respect for dog and human flesh, and will reduce the risk of hard bites, but according to Dr. Ian Dunbar, it's important to teach bite inhibition in two steps. First the dog needs to learn how to control the power behind its bite by learning to bite gently. Then all unwanted biting must be faded into extinction. However, if you have an out-of-control puppy you may wish to teach both steps at the same time.

Creating a Gentle Mouth

To teach your pup to control the power of its bite there needs to be consistent consequences for hard biting. If the pup puts any force behind its bite you have three options:

Yelp

1. Let out a yelp to let the pup know it hurt you then ignore it until it's no longer demanding your attention. Because some puppies will enjoy this – viewing you as somewhat of a squeaky toy, this technique will not work with every puppy.

Leave the Room

2. As soon as your puppy bites with too much force, give a no reward marker such as “too bad” (marking the moment your pup made the wrong choice) then immediately leave the room shutting the door behind you. As soon as your pup is calm and quiet you can come back out.

Time Out

3. Put a lightweight leash on your pup during times when you feel biting may be an issue. The moment your puppy bites with too much force give your no reward marker, pick up the end of the leash and remove the pup to its “time out” place. If your dog resists the leash, instead of picking it up which rewards the behaviour or dragging it by the leash switch to option 2. (See above) – Leave the room.

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As soon as your pup is calm and quiet, it can come out again. It's crucial to ignore all barking and only pay attention when it's quiet. The leash is important because grabbing your puppy will either reward the behaviour with attention, turn it into a chase game, cause your pup to bite you even harder, create fear and/or hand shyness. Reaching for the pup should always be a good thing.

Your time out place needs to be somewhere your dog can't get into any trouble. If you use your crate or exercise pen, make sure you move it to a different location and that all toys and blankets have been removed. The idea is to make sure your pup is safe so you can ignore it but you also want to avoid creating an unpleasant association with your dog's confinement area. Another option is to play with your pup in its safe area and walk out when it bites too hard. Through repetition your puppy will learn that biting too hard makes you leave, and controlling its mouth makes you stay.

As the force of its bite becomes gentler, you'll continue to react to the hardest bites. If you're consistent, your puppy will end up with a gentle mouth and a pup that's thinking about what its mouth is doing is less likely to break skin if it ever feels the need to defend itself. Your goal is to create a gentle mouth before your pup develops its adult teeth and powerful jaws, which occur at around five months of age. (See "Time Out" handout)

Fading the Behaviour

In order to fade the frequency of the behaviour your dog needs to understand and respect your release cue. The "leave it" cue will come in handy in many situations throughout your dog's life such as: biting your ankles, chasing the cat, nipping at running children, eating inappropriate items on your walk, sniffing around your food, getting into the garbage, etc. In a nutshell, "leave it" means to remove your nose from whatever it's on.

Teaching Leave It and Take It

1. Crouch in front of your dog with a treat in your hand. Hold the treat in a closed fist right in front of your dog's nose with the palm of your hand facing the dog.

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2. Hold the treat steady and ignore everything your dog does until it removes its nose from your hand. Do not use your “leave it” cue yet.
3. The moment your dog removes its nose, say, “take it” as you open your hand allowing your dog to take the treat.
4. After a few repetitions, your dog will target your hand and immediately pull back realizing this is the only behaviour that works to get the treat. As soon as this realization occurs and your dog offers the desired behaviour you can add the “leave it” cue as you present the treat in your closed fist. You’ll notice your dog becoming gentler and more controlled as it takes the treat from the palm of your hand.

Open your hand immediately when your dog removes its nose, whether it’s sniffing the floor to see if you dropped the treat or is distracted by something. Correct timing is important for your dog to learn that pulling back from your hand is the way to earn the treat.



1. Harley sniffs the treat



2. Harley removes his nose

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3. "Take it" - Margaret Ann rewards Harley with a treat



4. "Leave it" - Harley learns that "leave it" means to remove his nose to earn the treat

Once your dog understands "leave it," require it to wait for the count of two before rewarding it with "take it." When your dog is controlling itself for the count of two, increase the length of time by a couple more seconds each time. As you achieve success, gradually increase the length of time until your dog is waiting for one minute before earning the treat. At this point you'll mix up the length of time your dog needs to wait so that it cannot predict when the treat is coming.

Although Dr. Ian Dunbar recommends using a treat to entice your dog to let go of you, many dogs will quickly realize that biting you results in treats. If at any time your pup refuses to let go of you, quickly remove your hand from its mouth and leave the room at once.

I'm constantly sticking my hand in the puppies' mouths in my training classes and I do this to test their bite inhibition. If a pup is biting too hard it's important to increase the bite inhibition exercises to prevent long term problems. These exercises should continue throughout a dog's life to ensure superior control and prevent the bites from becoming harder as it ages.

During my early studies I was taught that you should never rough house with a dog but I disagree. As long as you follow "*Rules for Games*", playing with your dog will increase your dog's self-control and your control over the dog. However, if you play without rules you could be headed for trouble.

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Rules for Games

Games such as chasing, rough housing, tug-o-war and retrieval can be used to teach your dog to respect human flesh if the games are played with rules. Games with rules teach your dog self-control and increase your control over your dog. Games without rules increase your dog's control over you.

Rule # One – Use one cue to start the game, such as “let’s play” and one cue to end it, such as “finished.” It doesn’t matter which cue you choose as long as it always means the same thing. You should always be in control by deciding when the game starts and ends. No exceptions! The game **MUST** end the moment you say so. If your dog doesn’t stop playing on cue simply leave the room and close the door. If you’re playing with a toy – take the toy with you. Remembering Rule # One of benevolent leadership – Ignore all Demands, it’s important to never begin the game when your dog is demanding it.

Rule # Two – Keep your games short to avoid getting your dog too excited. The longer you play, the higher your dog’s energy rises making it more difficult to control. Thirty seconds at a time is plenty to start, followed by a “settle down” or self-control exercise. When your dog is calm, the game can resume. As your dog learns to control itself while playing, you can increase the length of your play sessions.

Rule # Three – When playing tug-o-war, use one toy only so your dog does not attempt to play the game at inappropriate times or with inappropriate objects. Keep your tug toy out of reach until you bring it out and invite your dog to play. When your game is finished, put the toy away.

Rule # Four – This is the **MOST IMPORTANT RULE** and must be followed consistently. If so much as one tooth touches your clothing or flesh, gentle or hard, accidental or on purpose, the game must end immediately. When your dog is biting clothing, you won’t know how hard it’s biting and if it accidentally grabs flesh as well, it could hurt. This rule will teach your dog to avoid using its teeth to keep you playing the game. A dog that’s proactively avoiding human contact with its mouth is a lot less likely to bite someone.

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Begin by playing outside a bedroom or bathroom door or inside your pup's safe area. Sit on the floor and give your "let's play" cue as this will entice your dog to jump on you and begin playing. The second you feel a tooth or your dog ignores a cue, stand up, slip through the door and close it behind you or leave the safe area. When you open the door and your dog sits calmly for you, sit back down and begin playing again. If it doesn't, close the door and try again.

Hand Feeding

Another way to practice your dog's self-control is to hand feed a few kibbles from every meal and require your pup to earn all treats following the rules laid out above. The kibble or treat must NEVER be given to the pup until its sitting quietly and keeping its mouth to itself. When the pup learns that it only gets the food when it's being gentle – that's what it will do.

Play with Friends

By giving a young pup plenty of opportunity to play with friendly and healthy dogs, the other dogs will tell your puppy when it's biting too hard. Giving socialized dogs regular opportunities to play with one another will help keep these skills fine-tuned. If you can't find suitable playmates search your area for a dog daycare or social training class run by positive, educated and experienced trainers who supervise and pro-actively interact with the group.

Your goal is that by five months of age your pup learns to never put its mouth on you unless invited to do so following the Rules for Games, always does so gently and immediately releases on cue.

References

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Dr. Ian Dunbar, How To Teach A New Dog Old Tricks, James & Kenneth Publishers 1991
Dr. Ian Dunbar – Dogstardaily.com/training/teaching-bite-inhibition