



Greater Androscoggin Humane Society

www.SavingPetsinMaine.org

Puppy Mouthing

Bite inhibition is a dog's ability to control the force of their bite. A puppy learns this at a young age by spending time with other puppies, their mother, other adult dogs, and even humans. This is a key learning factor due to the potential for injury when a puppy is biting too hard or even when an adult dog may bite and break skin on a human. If puppies are taught to not bite, then later on in life it will prevent the accidental breaking of skin, injuries, bite quarantines, etc.

When people separate a mother/litter at a young age, key social skills and bite inhibition may not have been fully learned or if a puppy has not had much interaction with humans, he or she does not yet know what force is acceptable to sensitive human skin. Puppies learn bite inhibition up to 18 weeks of age, so when humans adopt/purchase/etc, young puppies it is our job to help teach them these social skills so as an adult they are safe in play, react to a stimuli negatively, etc.

If a puppy is younger than 18 weeks, it is counter-productive to completely stop their biting because we need to continue teaching them. Instead, biting should be allowed so that they can learn how much force is acceptable to human skin. When we scold, grab their mouths, stop them from biting etc, they are not learning. Instead, depending on when the puppy is biting (during play) we should initially pay attention to the level of force used when biting and instead of completely stopping, teach the puppy what "force" is acceptable. After "force" is learned, work on completely curbing mouthing/biting.

To teach bite inhibition and curb mouthing, initially allow your puppy to bite during play. If the puppy bites too hard, you can try a loud yelp and let your hand go limp. Watch for your puppy to startle/stop when you yelp. You can also make a loud noise to interrupt the biting. Most puppies will stop at those noises and "think" at that time and that is when you can present an appropriate toy or continue playtime. Some puppies are so excited by play that they do not pay any mind to the cues you are giving and that is when time-outs are effective. If a puppy ignores your cue and continues mouthing/biting, after the third attempt make the same noise chosen, then ignore him/her by either turning your back or getting up and moving away. In order to prevent the pup from following, the use of a tether may help. Wait 20-30 seconds and repeat. Eventually pup should accept toy, soften mouth, or show restraint when mouthing.

When a puppy bites/mouths it is important to pay attention to where they are biting. Hands are common but some dogs find high value in biting pant legs, ankles, feet, etc, which sometimes has to do with breed. Herding-type dogs have a tendency to bite at feet, ankles, etc, because that is what they do when in working mode, like when people/children are running by. To combat this, immediately stop, turn to the side, and completely ignore the puppy/dog and try tossing a toy out.

Behavior Helpline: 207-312-5873 or Maria@gahumane.org



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It is also important to ask yourself why the puppy is biting. What is your reaction to the biting? What value does your puppy have in continuing to bite? Most of the time puppies only want one thing...attention...either negative or positive. So are we giving them that in some way? When we push the dog away, say no, grab their muzzles, laugh, engage in play etc, we are unknowingly encouraging the biting to continue. When we ignore the biting completely it loses its value because the desired response isn't there. The puppy will learn to try something else for your attention. (grabbing a toy, replacing that behavior with another either undesired or desired, etc.)

If the puppy is young, ignoring the behavior and waiting for a desired behavior to occur (a sit, a pause, bringing a toy, etc.) is the most effective method. You may try replacing your hand or clothing etc, with tossing a toy as you walk by.

If a dog over 18 weeks is biting hands and it is your opinion that it is for attention and ignoring does not seem to be effective enough, a humane (and usually effective) way to discourage biting of the hand is to spray your hand with a deterrent (bitter apple or a home remedy your vet would approve of.) Some common sprays made utilize apple cider vinegar or lemon mixed with cayenne pepper. That naturally teaches a dog that biting is no fun when sprayed or hands dipped in solution and presented when puppy/dog is play biting. You can also use the spray for clothing, shoes etc, but always replace those items with toys and plenty of enrichment as dogs will chew out of boredom many times.

Some puppies get overstimulated easily and start to bite when petted, groomed, etc. That could be due to body sensitivity, desire for play, or other handling issues. To combat this, hand-feed small high-value treats while handling your dog if it is assumed it could be any of these issues.