

# Inhibiting Puppy Biting

By Mary Mazzeri

Not all puppy biting is created equal. First, one needs to determine if the puppies are play biting or protest biting. Younger puppies usually use their mouths a LOT and some are very mouthy. Certain breeds are very oral (retrievers come to mind). For simple play biting, especially with younger puppies, I suggest as the first line of defense simply quietly and deliberately withdrawing from the pup. Especially if biting is directed at the hands, as when trying to pet the pup. Sometimes this has to be done slowly, deliberately, and many times in a row before the pup realizes it is turning off the petting machine when it bites at it. Once a pup settles somewhat, I try to pet the pup when the pup is not mouthing. All must be done quietly and calmly, no sudden moves to trigger the prey drive.

With clothing and children, I use Grannick's Bitter apple (R) anti chew spray on the clothing and on the children. I also wipe it on the pup's tongue from my fingers so it gets a strong taste of it. They are more likely to associate the smell with remembering the strong, bad taste. (Once it dries, it isn't as potent.)

Now, protest biting is another matter. When a pup bites in response to restraint or over possessions, I handle it differently, and again according to age, size etc. Sometimes when pups are overtired they get crabby, just like young children (and me too of course), so the best solution for that is a time out--rest in the cage. But since the pup can't realistically live in the cage, somewhere along the line we need to communicate to puppies that human flesh is off limits to teeth.

The need to chew must be considered too. Provide pups with plenty of safe chewables. With younger pups, when possible, a chewable toy should be substituted when they start chewing on people.

When I raise a litter of wolfhounds, I start teaching bite inhibition at the time their first set of teeth come in, around 4 weeks or so. I hand feed one pup at a time, using meat. They are pretty ravenous about meat, so when they grab at my fingers pretty roughly with their teeth, I fold back my middle finger under my thumb and flick them under the chin to startle them. Usually it takes 3-4 flicks during the first few feedings, but gradually they distinguish between beef/chicken and human and come back very carefully to lick the meat out of my fingers. When they do this I praise them very soothingly and allow them to eat.

I allow NO 'rough and rile 'em up' games from visitors as the pups are growing (I usually send my pups home at 10 weeks 80% housebroken, bite inhibited and started on come, sit, and down with lures.) I also require puppy and basic obedience classes of my puppy buyers.



Most pups that go home too early (before 7 weeks at a minimum) tend to be very mouthy because they didn't have enough time to develop social skills with other dogs. During that time, if they bite a littermate, it bites them back or stops playing with it and goes away. But even older pups need to learn what they can and cannot chew on! Human flesh is off limits. (Now I know a lot of dogs 'affectionately' hold their owners arm in their mouths; I have an Irish Wolfhound that does it, but I do not encourage a beginner to allow this.) I want to inhibit biting. These people may want their pet to be a watchdog, but I tell them a biting puppy is not a protection dog, it is a lawsuit on four paws. So for the puppy that bites in response to being held or because someone tried to walk past their food bowl etc., I teach the "scruff and cuff." It must occur within 1/2 second of the protest and must "end the discussion." That means taking hold of the pup by its neck scruff/collar behind the ears and lifting the front just enough for the weight to come off the pup's front paws. My right hand sneaks up under the jaw and cuffs it. This is done with an open hand and stiffened fingers, enough to cause a submissive reaction. I don't let go of the scruff until this has occurred. Sometimes a pup will come back at the person giving the correction. This indicates that the cuff was inadequate and the dog thought you were baiting or 'flanking' it so to speak. That cuff needs to be swift and forceful enough to slightly startle the pup. Too little is as bad as too much. A calm, quiet warning growl should accompany the correction.

Once the dog "changes its tune," I replace the grip on the scruff with a slow massage about the neck and soothing conversation. For the student that isn't able to affect this change, it is usually because their timing is off, or they are not cuffing the pup in a startling manner that says STOP. Again they are not hitting at the pup but 'chucking' it from under the chin. All of this is done unemotionally and without conversation. It is just a 'cause and reflex' reaction. I've had good success with this over a broad range of puppies. The pup with strong (ADR-aggressive defensive reflex) is the type most likely to continue to snap or snarl. It is important to be dead calm about dealing with excitable puppies. If a pup is really worked up over something, I may restrain it on its side until it relaxes. (Sort of like restraining someone having a seizure to prevent them from hurting themselves or anyone else.) When I release the pup, if it goes right back and takes up where it left off, I'll repeat the restraint until the pup gets up and goes away quietly. No emotion, no malice, just inevitable restraint. In the end, when it finally accepts the restraint, the pup is always brought to the point where it can and should be praised.

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Mary Mazzeri

Care Dog Training-since 1970

Carpentersville, IL

