

PUPPY BITING

WHY DO PUPPIES BITE? Play biting and fighting is absolutely one of the most important developmental pieces puppies do. They must receive feedback for their bite so they can acquire the skill of monitoring and adjusting the force of their jaws. That process is what develops *Acquired Bite Inhibition* (ABI). Good ABI is what makes a safe dog in adulthood. This can only be done in the early stages before it's locked in forever. There are no methods to alter this after adolescence. Thus, play biting for puppies is not only natural, *it's absolutely necessary*.

If you were to observe your puppy playing with another puppy they'd bite that other puppy a lot. Puppies bite so they can receive feedback on the *force* of the bite. This is why they have such sharp teeth—so they can get a reaction with their relatively weak jaw muscles.

A dog that has never adequately developed ABI will not know how to monitor and adjust the force of their jaws as an adult, when they have big adult teeth and big adult jaw muscles.

Consider this scenario: an adult dog is asleep in the family room and a toddler steps on it. A dog with good ABI won't even make contact, whereas a dog with poor ABI might bite that poor kid badly. In this case, an ounce of prevention is worth a kiloton of cure!

BOTTOM LINE: You don't want to stop the biting, because then the bite training stops too.

OKAY, SO WHAT DO WE DO ABOUT IT?

Intensity Before Frequency: as with any annoying behavior, in the correct progression you will see a reduction in intensity before you see a reduction in frequency. This is a training Master Key. Biting will get softer and softer before actual incidents of biting diminish. *Force must be trained before frequency*.

Get Your Feedback Game Straightened Out: As we've said multiple times all over Simpawtico material, feedback is a key component to having a dog. More often than not, though, owners' feedback is *weak*.

Without going into a full lesson on feedback, markers, and all of that, some of the main ideas are:

- Don't take any good behavior for granted, especially something you got for free. Praise and reward all good behavior, including soft mouth.
- Mistakes are an opportunity to try again. If they were bad 3 seconds ago but are being good now, you must say so! Analog, representative feedback is critical.
- If you don't have a consistent communication system with your dog, get on it. Read our article on using feedback: <http://www.simpawtico-training.com/marker-training/>

SPECIFIC STRATEGIES:

PROVIDE MEANINGFUL FEEDBACK, PART ONE: Dogs do the work of feedback 50x faster and better than we do. Get your puppy to off-leash puppy classes or play groups ASAP. You can do this after the 2nd round of

shots. In the meantime, you can have other puppies over to play. Lots of them. A good puppy class or series of play dates will make a tremendous difference in your puppy, not just with biting.

PROVIDE MEANINGFUL FEEDBACK, PART TWO: Your puppy has to believe that humans are super sensitive. Every time they bite you, you cry out. Don't cry out like a puppy, and don't try to yip like a puppy. You're a grown adult for crying out loud! Act like it hurts (which it probably does). Loudly say "OUCH! That hurt your little worm!"

HERE IS THE SECRET TO MAKING THAT WORK: the internet tells you to cry out like this but never fills in the rest of the strategy...DO NOT jerk your hand (or whatever body part) away. Movement is stimulating and that triggers chase drive. They'll just go harder for it. Instead, leave it there. *Your puppy needs to be the one to back off.*

If you say "OUCH!" loud enough and sharp enough, your puppy should buck their head back. IMMEDIATELY start praising and allow them to reengage. If they're softer, tell them "Good puppy!" If not, keep it up, and increase your tone and volume (but don't yell). This feedback and commentary needs to be both binary (right and wrong) and constant. One or two times won't do it; *it takes weeks to do right!*

And remember, you're not trying to stop biting with this strategy, you want to see it getting softer and softer over the weeks. Also make sure to cry out even if they grab your clothing or hair. Your puppy doesn't know the difference between these and skin, but should eventually be gentle with both!

Bail out if it's too much. If during a session your puppy is too jazzed up and is not responding to the work, then *leave*. Simple as that. *Don't put the puppy somewhere else for a timeout.* That's non-instructive and it's not fast enough. YOU be the one to get up and leave. This is how puppies do it with each other: a hard bite produces a yelp and play stops momentarily. Well nobody wants that, so they learn to monitor and adjust. If you, the playmate of the moment, gets up and leaves unceremoniously that's a big thing to a puppy. Come back 30 to 60 seconds later to try again.

This is precisely one of the reasons we don't let our puppies have free reign of the house yet. They exist in gated off rooms for a while and earn more space over time. In the meantime, you have to be able to get away when the puppy is too intense.

Don't label it as "bad behavior." It's not. It's inconvenient for us humans, but we don't call it "bad behavior" when a baby poops its pants or cries at night...you know this is part of what you signed up for, inconvenient as it is. *Biting is natural and necessary.* Don't waste the opportunity to create a safe adult dog.

Do not scold. Scolding for doing something mother nature has hard wired them to do is just unproductive and mean. They won't learn from it. You'll increase stress and make them afraid. Give feedback!

CLIMB THE ABI LADDER: As you work you'll notice your puppy's biting getting softer and softer over the weeks. If you've given timely, appropriate feedback the play biting should just be mouthing now. At this point, it's appropriate to start addressing the frequency of incidents.

You should have been integrating obedience training into your puppy work all along the way anyways, so it's a simple matter to use incompatible behaviors to stop the mouthing. Ask for sits, redirect to better behaviors, engage them in interactive play, or simply give them feedback (depending on how good your communication system is and your rapport).

ADJUNCT STRATEGIES: there are other things you can do to work in some more mouth control as your puppy grows.

- Chew toys for teething (intended for quiet time)
- Gentle tug for playful opposition and energy; also builds manners and impulse control
- Make sure you're using good food handling. Read about it in the ["Swiss Army Knife"](#) PDF, or take a look at our Power Tip #2 post, ["Take Treats Nicely"](#) for more: <http://www.simpawtico-training.com/taking-treats-nicely/>

MYTHBUSTING—what does NOT work and WHY: There are a lot of solutions offered by well-meaning friends and family, and dozens of articles on the internet. Most of them are total rubbish.

- **"Leave It."** This prevents any opportunity to learn Bite Inhibition. It's great to learn on the side but useless for play biting. Use this after they've mastered ABI.
- **"Drop It."** This also provides zero feedback on the force of the bite, despite how useful it is to know. Teach this with Tug and save it for play and retrieving contraband.
- **Shouting "No Bite!"** This only works if they've had specific lessons on the meaning of that phrase, away from the situation they're biting in. As with all the others, it stops the bite training altogether.
- **Tapping them on the nose.** This is great if you want to teach your dog that you're a bully. Also great for creating a head-shy dog. However, it does nothing for play biting. You'll probably get some relief from the biting, though, because the puppy will just learn to stop interacting with you.
- **Sticking your thumb in their mouth and smash their tongue against their teeth.** Are you kidding?! This doesn't teach anything except to be afraid of you. It's abuse, and it makes no training sense at all.
- **Squirt bottles.** Do we squirt babies in the face when they do something we find annoying?
- **Using a muzzle.** This prevents ALL interaction pretty much guaranteeing a hard biter as an adult. Also, it means no eating, drinking, playing with toys, or anything related to just being a puppy. This is lazy and irresponsible.
- **Redirecting to a chew toy.** Puppies don't bite when they play to relieve teething pains. As you've learned, they bite to learn ABI. You might get a temporary respite, but it'll be short lived and you missed a teachable moment. Chew toys are for chewing during quiet times. Chewing is emotionally satisfying and relieves teething discomfort. Play biting serves a whole other purpose; don't waste the opportunity!

AGE LIMITS: by about 18 weeks the brain chemistry starts changing and your window for learning ABI will start closing. **DON'T WAIT!** By six months it will be pretty much closed and the methods listed above won't work anymore. If you have an 8-month old dog jumping up and grabbing your arms or sleeves, and you haven't done the work already, you're going to be in a pickle. You'll need different methods to fix that. Contact a qualified trainer or behaviorist to help you out!