

Ouch! My Puppy is Biting Me...

The Importance of Attending a Puppy Class to Teach Bite Inhibition and Play Skills

By Kari Bastyr, MS, CDBC

Recently I had the pleasure of attending a seminar in Atlanta with the world-renowned veterinary behaviorist Dr. Ian Dunbar. In the early 1980s, he invented what we know as "Puppy Socialization Class." Dunbar was one of the first to recognize that we should train our puppies before they develop bad habits and much earlier than the old methods of starting to train a dog at 6 months of age. He also acknowledges that not only should puppies be given proper socialization at an earlier age, but taught to have good "bite inhibition." Bite inhibition means the puppy or adult dog learns how to have a soft mouth and does not consciously use the full force of his biting ability. It should be taught before 12 weeks of age. If a dog does not have good bite inhibition, he could seriously injure or kill another dog or human. According to Dr. Dunbar, teaching this behavior involves two steps: first, to inhibit the force of the puppy's bite and second, to lessen the frequency of puppy mouthing.

Playtime should be an essential part to every puppy's initial training. Young dogs learn wonderfully from

other dogs about what is and is not appropriate, both for play and using their teeth. Since all puppies want to do is play, it is a great opportunity to teach them to have a soft mouth and can be much more effective than teaching them yourself.



Photo by Michael Zysman

However, if your puppy is biting too much or too hard, you must start teaching them at home that it is not appropriate. Here are some general guidelines to use when working with your puppy at home:

- Make sure all play stops when your puppy begins mouthing or biting. Turn your body away and cross your arms for a few seconds, then resume play when your puppy stops mouthing.



Kari Bastyr, shown here with Jasper, is owner of Wag and Train in Denver.

- Use the word "Ouch" if he begins to bite. When he stops, praise and give him lots of love.
- Use the command "Gentle" when giving treats and use your fist to roll the treat out of your hand if your puppy is not using his teeth.
- Smear a dab of peanut butter on the back of your hand and give your puppy the command "No Bite." Praise him for licking the peanut butter off and not using his teeth.
- Teach your puppy the "Off" command so he gets rewarded for taking his mouth away from your hand.
- Always have plenty of Kongs or Everlasting Treat Balls to give your puppy to chew on appropriately. I do not recommend soft squeaker or fabric toys as these can teach your puppy it is acceptable to chew things up.

- Do not clamp his mouth shut or hit him on the nose as punishment for biting. This could cause serious consequences later.
- Do not tease your puppy or try to start playing with him using your hands.

It is imperative that no biting be allowed in any context. Some of my clients have said, "He is 'play biting' so it's okay." I assure you it is not okay! So-called play biting is actually just an extension of all other biting, and none of it should be tolerated.

Many people think that socializing a puppy at home with their other dog,

or the neighbor's dog is enough, but it is not. Your puppy needs to learn how to socialize with many other puppies, humans and friendly adult dogs. If your puppy is only familiar with how to play with your older dog, he will not learn about other dogs' language or how to generalize play time to other dogs. Without proper socialization, your puppy could develop fear reactivity with other dogs that can turn into aggression.

When you are looking for a puppy class, be sure to find one that includes a majority of playtime, in addition to bite inhibition, socialization and desensitization exercises. Puppy play class should not be confused with obedience class as the goal of these two classes is different. It is

highly recommended that you attend both. Puppy classes should be no bigger than ten puppies or divided up into smaller play groups and should ideally have a mixture of small, medium and large breed puppies. Ages can range from 8-18 weeks and all puppies must have at least their first set of shots. As with any behavior class, it is critical that only positive, gentle methods are used and your instructor must have a background in teaching proper bite inhibition and puppy socialization.

For more information on Wag and Train's free drop-in super puppy class or other training classes, please visit www.wagandtrain.com, or call Kari Bastyr MS, CDBC at 720-312-5499. 🐾

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