

Play biting

Physical games including play-biting are natural games puppies play with each other and when you bring your puppy home he may try to play the same games with you. Pups which are highly motivated to play can charge at owners, jumping up, nip hands and bite and tug on clothes. If this is directed at a child who starts to cry or run or tries to push the pup away this may be misinterpreted by the puppy as being a playful response from the child who is now joining in the pup's game.

Trying to cope with the pups increasingly rough attempts to initiate, demand and dictate play by giving in and doing what it wants will make it more likely that the pup will increase its play-biting to get what it wants in the future, which can soon become a never ending battle of nipping, biting and jumping up. Trying to hit or grab the pup will probably make him become rougher as to him you are responding and joining in his game or he may feel he has to defend himself against your increasing anger.

It is very important to avoid the stimulation and excitement escalation that go with physical punishment or restraint.

Resorting to distraction tactics during a play-biting situation like throwing a ball or waving a piece of food in front of the pups face to try to end the nipping can actually reward the pups demanding behaviour and rough style of play. In fact the pup is leaning to be even more pushy when he wants to play or get attention because it always works. Just ignoring him while he continues to chew on your hand or grab your clothing or leaving the room while he changes his target to someone else or decides to have a wonderful time rearranging the cushions or pruning the house plants will be completely ineffective in changing his problem behavior. Using any form of harsh punishment is also counterproductive. It may indeed stop the biting attack at the time. However it holds no instruction to the puppy to encourage and develop more acceptable behaviour for the future.

So what to do to control the puppies masquerading as sharks. It is quite a common problem with pups displaying varying degrees of the behaviour with some becoming more difficult to cope with especially for the companion dog owner.

The relationship and bond that a dog has as a family companion is special and with most puppies given sensible guidance early on, unruly behaviour gives way to a more controlled, calmer attitude as the pup grows up. But some are more persistent and intervention is needed to communicate to the puppy in a way it can understand a more acceptable behaviour and relationship.

One method is to use the consistent application of an interrupting sound to temporarily suppress the problem behaviour every time it happens combined with an immediate procedure which encourages the puppy to engage in acceptable play or behaviour.

There is an important difference in communicating to the puppy which behaviour we want between using Distraction Tactics or Interruption Tactics. For example with distraction tactics the puppy is fully engaged in still chewing on your hand at the same time being rewarded for it because a toy or food is being offered to him. With interruption tactics he has stopped or even not quite started chewing on your hand before being offered the toy or food so he is now being rewarded for the behaviour we want "NO BITING".

An interrupting sound is most effective if it happens just before the pup launches a mouthing attack on hands or clothes. To do this carry or place around the house a noise making device such as a small container with some pebbles in which can be shaken to make a loud noise , or a commercially brought "Pet Corrector" which is a small canister that gives off a loud hiss when the top is pressed-handy to keep in a pocket. The intention is to startle the pup not to hurt him. His reaction will be one of surprise on hearing the sound causing him to temporarily stop his actions. At this exact moment you must fill this moment of inaction (otherwise he will go back to doing whatever it was before)by encouraging the pup to play in a more acceptable way with a toy by wiggling or rolling a ball along the ground close to him , keeping his attention on the toy. If he shows interest in your hands again, quickly repeat the interrupting sound and reengage him onto the toy.

With some puppies just a stern "Ah Ah" can interrupt an unwanted behaviour, before giving an incompatible behaviour to focus on, he cannot be tugging on a sleeve if he is being rewarded for a sit. Some experimentation may be needed here because of individual differences between pups in their reactions to various sounds. It should not be difficult to find something that is effective. The sound should be enough to stop the problem behaviour immediately and every time but not so severe that the puppy becomes extremely fearful and reluctant to approach at all. Always remember once a problem behaviour is interrupted you must reward any acceptable behaviour immediately. The puppy must be able to associate his rough behaviour with the consequences- the sound he finds unpleasant .Therefore he will learn that his action-nipping and biting causes a reaction the startle sound which he will want to avoid. The moment he starts to get too pushy and rough the interrupting sound will pin point the exact moment he must stop. Any lack of clarity or consistency on your part about the threshold he must not cross will make improvement in his behaviour very slow, because he will not understand what he can and cannot do.

For the pup to learn to inhibit the force of any mouthing , bites or rough interaction you must be consistent with the correct timing of the interrupting sound and very importantly Remain Calm while showing the pup the behaviour he can engage in .it can take some time , but the better you are the quicker he will learn .

To satisfy the pup's motivation to play and be active be inventive in the games you teach him, such as find the toy hidden just out of sight encouraging him to use his nose as well as his eyes. Make it easy to find to start with to keep him interested. Include mental stimulation of highly rewarded gentle obedience training. Call him to you, calmly tell him to sit then reward with a titbit or resume play interacting with a toy. Teach him to lie down, wait, come when called, there is so much your clever puppy can do, giving him a positive outcome for his energy. Just something to bear in mind when trying to stop play biting.

In a litter of puppies all is peaceful as they sleep, but one is awake, bored and wants to play. So he rushes up, pounces on an unsuspecting litter mate and gives a sharp nip. The other puppy responds and chases his attacker. The game is on.

The very game your pups previous experience taught him how to get you to play.

For play biting to decrease it is also important to follow some general management rules. Adding more opportunities for the puppy to take part in controlled interesting physical and mental games (suitable for his age) where success can stimulate the brains reward chemistry and change his emotions to be more relaxed, instead of driving everyone crazy with unruly behaviour and continuous pestering to play.

No more games of rough and tumble encouraging the puppy to bite and grab hands.

No more harsh handling or waving hands around the pups face. Never tease him.

Always supervise young children with the puppy. If your puppy does something you don't want do not let it happen again. Plan the incompatible rewarding behaviour. Concentrate on conditioning a well behaved puppy. Notice and reward desired human –puppy interactions. Locating and joining a good puppy class can be extremely beneficial. If possible find a GSD Breed Club.

Overtime as other suitable behaviours are reinforced with rewards and clear calm instructions the puppy will abandon rough play to gain attention or hard nipping to try to push the family as he would his litter mates.

All puppies and households are different and any behaviour modification especially rough play biting is an on-going process and should be appropriate for the individual situation.

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