

Biting and Nipping

Puppies start off with no teeth but unfortunately they do not stay that way for long. A sharp set of puppy teeth is included with each new puppy at no additional charge. Young puppies are very anxious to test their new teeth on most everything in your home — including people. This is a normal developmental stage that will eventually pass — the new owner's task is to protect the furniture and children.

A puppy that is biting everything in sight is simply fulfilling his/her job description, and is not misbehaving. This does not mean that we allow our finger to be chewed to the bone but it does mean that punishment is not an acceptable or ethical way to handle this normal behavior. Would it seem okay to slap a human baby for putting everything in her mouth? We recognize that human babies explore their world by putting things in their mouths and ensure that they are given acceptable objects to fulfill this need — puppies need the same kind of understanding and management of their need to chew.

The job of the puppies is to chew and bite — the job of the humans is to direct this normal need to appropriate objects. Obviously the humans need to provide acceptable alternatives to the antique table leg. A trip to the pet store reveals that there are people whose job it is to design things for puppies to chew on — the selection seems endless! Plastic bones flavored with chicken, red bones that are fruit flavored, squeaky toys in every possible shape, ears without the pigs attached, knotted rawhide, rolled rawhide, and even rawhide shaped like shoes — what is a new puppy owner to do with all these choices?

This is one of those decisions made on some personal preferences — both owner and puppy. Stuffed squeaky toys may not be the best way to satisfy the urge to chew, although a collection of them in the living room is very cute and some puppies enjoy them. Rawhide can be swallowed and cause problems, but works for many people and their puppies. I generally avoid rawhide because of the chemicals that are used in processing it, and because dogs can swallow such big pieces. If rawhide seems like an acceptable choice, the rolled types seem to hold up better, and I would buy ones made in America. Also, rawhide gnawing is best done under supervision and some can stain carpets so watch for that. Nylabones are boring to some dogs but certain types do work well when one needs something to offer a puppy that wants to cuddle and chew at the same time. Raw marrow bones are acceptable to many of us as a chew object but never, ever give a puppy a cooked bone as they are brittle and splinter.

It is to be expected that the puppy will try his/her new teeth on the humans — this is normal behavior. Our job is to teach the puppy that humans are far too delicate and noisy to be used as a chew toy. Always have an acceptable alternative to humans available to offer the puppy. It is normal to need to hold a chew toy while cuddling with the new puppy — unless he puppy is sleeping.

But what do we do when the puppy insists on chewing on people? Some advocate a zero tolerance method for mouthing. In other words, the puppy is never allowed to mouth or

bite at people. There is evidence to suggest that this is not the best approach. A better way to handle normal puppy mouthing and biting is to teach bite inhibition. This means that we inform the puppy when the mouthing is too hard by letting out a blood-curdling shriek that scares the puppy and the neighbors. This is very effective for most puppies — they know that a "yip" means they went too far and will usually cease and desist with the problematic behavior immediately. The instant the puppy stops the undesired mouthing, the owner should resume normal interaction — puppies do not understand grudges.

No discussion of biting, nipping and other activities of land sharks would be complete without a discussion of puppies and children. I know we all think that puppies and kids are so cute together — that is a lie! Puppies and children are a most terrible combination because children tend to do all the things that incite puppies to draw blood. Specifically, children run, scream, wave their hands around and in the puppy's face, and generally behave like prey.

Training is in order when children are allowed with the puppy — and I mean training of the children, not the puppy. Children should never be allowed to visit with a puppy without supervision — our goal is to prevent bad habits so we must be vigilant. The children should be equipped with a chew toy when visiting the puppy, and instructed on proper use.

Children must understand that they are never to run or scream around the puppy. In fact, children should know how to "be a tree" as a defense against puppy attacks. This means the child stands still, folds his/her arms, and ignores the puppy when (not if!) the puppy gets too rough. Train the children to avoid reaching over the puppy's head to pet him/her — doing this seems to provoke a puppy to nip and the child's natural reaction to quickly pull away just starts a bad cycle as the puppy will usually go after the quickly moving hand. Finally, make sure the kids are well-dressed — long sleeves and long pants — because kids are harder to train than puppies and so are bound to sometimes ignore the puppy rules.

Puppies seem to bite and nip more when they are tired and/or wound up. If the usual techniques are not working put the puppy in a crate for a puppy time out. This is not punishment at all — it is simply a way to calm the puppy down so that bad habits are not formed. Like human three year olds, sometimes frenzied activity and/or a tantrum is a signal that the little one has had enough, and needs some quiet time to nap or just settle down.

A nipping puppy is not fun, and their little teeth will undoubtedly draw blood on their humans at least once. The most important thing to know when dealing with a piranha in a cute puppy suit is that this stage is temporary — and normal. It does not typically reflect aggression nor is it an indicator that you will have a vicious dog on your hands. Puppies chew and bite and nip — that is their job for a while. Your job is to help both of you get through this stage with the least amount of damage.