**“HELP! My puppy is biting me and my children!!!”**

I can’t count the number of times I’ve gotten a phone call from a panicked parent who is considering sending their new puppy back to the breeder or to a shelter because the puppy is biting them, their child, and they think that perhaps their pup is aggressive, or bad, or that they can’t handle a puppy in a house with children.  Sometimes the parent has contacted other trainers who haven’t offered any help, but who have said things like “never leave a puppy and a young child together unsupervised” and the parent took this to mean that combining puppies and children is dangerous.  Puppies and children CAN co-exist in the same household, but it will take a bit of work and understanding, and yes supervision.  But really, I don’t recommend leaving young children unsupervised, whether or not there is a puppy in the mix.

Puppies bite everything.  Human babies do this too.  Remember when your child stuck everything into his or her mouth?  Puppies are learning about their world, and they are exploring, and everything, including your fingers and your child’s hands, are things your pup wants to learn about so into the mouth they go.  Puppies don’t have hands, so where your human baby patted things, and rolled things in his or her hands, your pup can only use his or her mouth.

It may seem like a cruel joke that puppies are at their most oral at the same time that their teeth are the sharpest, and yes puppy teeth hurt.  Dogs need to have exquisite control over their mouths.  They need to be able to exert the precise amount of control to gently lift and carry fragile items, and also to be able to rip and tear food.  Super sharp puppy teeth guarantee that the pup will get lots of feed back about how much pressure she/he is exerting.  When puppies play with each other they wrestle, and bite, and grab onto each other.  If one puppy bites another puppy too hard, the hurt pup will give a high pitched yelp and go a bit limp.  The biting pup should immediately back off.  If the biting pup persists with biting too hard, the one being bitten will refuse to play with the biter.  Thus puppies learn exactly how hard they can bite each other without hurting, and they gain control of their mouths.

The longer a pup stays with Mom and litter mates, the farther along in their bite inhibition training they will be, but even an 8 week old pup won’t have mastered his or her mouth so you’ll need to take over where Mom and the litter mates left off.  Some people punish a dog for using his or her mouth, and while in the short term this may solve the problem of sore hands, in the long term, the dog doesn’t learn sufficient bite inhibition.  Hurt dogs defend themselves by biting, and if something terrible happens, say your toddler hurts your dog badly, you want the dog to know that humans are fragile, and to be able to restrain himself and only put his mouth on your child, and not scar your child.  Bite inhibition is critical.  To teach this, (depending on the age of your children, you likely do not want them to do this) you want to solicit play with your hands.  When the puppy bites you too hard yelp like a hurt puppy and let your hand go limp.  Your pup should immediately back off.  When the pup backs off, start the game again.  If the pup is over-stimulated, or overly tired, the pup may have a bit of a temper tantrum, and may repeatedly bite too hard.  If this happens, your goal should be to calm your pup down, perhaps by giving the pup some time away from people, or using gentle friendly restraint.  When you yelp, a small percentage of puppies will

react as though your hand is prey, and will attack more, if this happens, cease playing with the pup and ignore the pup for a couple minutes every single time the pup bites too hard.  As with most things in dog training, repetition and consistency are important.  The more frequently you work on this with your puppy the sooner your puppy will learn to control his mouth.

Once your pup is able to play with you gently, it is time to let the puppy know that they can only play with your hands if they are invited to do so.  If the pup isn’t invited to play and grabs at your hands, either yelp like a hurt puppy again, or simply walk away.  In the beginning you’ll want to initiate the game a lot so that your puppy can learn the difference between being invited to play (puppy gets to play), and not being invited to play (puppy doesn’t get to play).  Once your pup understands that teeth can only touch human skin if invited to do so, you can gradually stop asking your puppy to play this game at all.

In addition to teaching your pup about bite inhibition, you want to provide your puppy with plenty of puppy-safe toys to chew.  Stuffed kongs, especially ones that are frozen, are a great toy for pups, but take a look at your local pet supply store, and try things out (see [www.kongcompany.com](http://www.kongcompany.com/) for kongs and stuffing ideas!).  Ideally you should get enough toys so that you can rotate the toys out.  Toys that a dog hasn’t seen in a couple weeks are far more exciting than toys that the dog sees on a daily basis.  Remember — puppies NEED to chew, so if you don’t provide things for the pup to chew on, your pup will find things to chew on, and you won’t like your puppy’s choices.

Depending on the age of your children, you’ll need to involve them in this process to a greater or lesser degree, but unless your child is a baby, your child will need to participate in the bite inhibition training.  Fortunately for many children their initial instinct when nipped by a puppy is to scream in a high pitched voice, and to refuse to play with the puppy.  But you still want to practice.  Start before your puppy arrives (or if you already have a puppy, start with the pup out of the room).  Have your child practice yelping like a hurt puppy.  Make this a fun game.  Also have them practice freezing, and going limp.  Make sure that your child does NOT hit the puppy, or get aggressive toward the puppy.

More important than teaching the child what to do when nipped, you want to set puppy and child up for successful interactions.  A great game to help with this is the Invisible Dog Game. You’ll need lots of dog treats for this.  The rules are as follows:

1. Dog must be on a leash no longer than 6 feet, and the leash must be held by an adult.

2. Dogs who are in a down position are VISIBLE.  Dogs who are doing ANYTHING except lying down, are INVISIBLE.

3. Dogs who are VISIBLE can be patted, talked to, and given treats.  Dogs who are INVISIBLE must be ignored.

4. Don’t talk to the dog or tell the dog what to do.  Just stick to the above rules, your dog will figure it out.

When you first play this game, your pup may have a hard time coming up with the idea to lie down.  That is OK, but you want to make sure that your child stays engaged, so talk to your child about how the dog is invisible and where is the dog, and so forth.  Try to avoid becoming so animated that the dog has fun with this.

As soon as your dog becomes visible (lies down), make a big deal about it.  “Oh, there is the dog!” and immediately give the dog treats.  If the dog leaps back up — and many will in the beginning — the dog is invisible again “where did the dog go?  Wasn’t the dog just here?”  As your dog gets the hang of this, your dog will spend longer, and longer time in the down position and you’ll have the opportunity to do things like — “where is the dog’s tail” and as soon as the child touches the dog’s tail, give the dog a cookie, and “how many paws does the dog have?” and give the dog a cookie each time the child touches a paw.  When the dog gets even better the child can sit with the dog, patting the dog and telling the dog stories.

Quit the game before dog and child get tired of the game.

Of course, puppies are learning a lot more than just about how to control their mouths, and puppies, like small children, can have temper tantrums or lose control of themselves.  Puppies who get overly tired, or over -stimulated, may nip more, may fling themselves about, may even air snap.  Puppies benefit from having a rhythm to their days, and to having plenty of nap time.  Puppies tend to be energetic in bursts, and then need to sleep.  Puppies who miss naps are often fussy, and grumpy.  Make sure that your pup is getting plenty of down time.  Puppies who don’t get enough exercise also have trouble controlling themselves.  You don’t want to go on overly long walks, or runs with your pup, but you do want them to have plenty of off-leash play time.

To recap — spend a lot of time teaching your puppy about bite inhibition, give your pup plenty of things to chew, teach your children what to do if the puppy nips them but try to avoid the pup nipping the children as much as you can, play games that teach positive ways for child and pup to interact, have a rhythm to your day that includes both active times and quiet times for the puppy.

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