



Puppy Play-Biting







"My young puppy keeps biting our hands
- HELP!"

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Young puppies are notorious at biting your hands - and those sharp puppy teeth can be very painful! But rest assured that this is a very normal thing - it doesn't mean that your pup is aggressive, just that she is young. If you watch a litter of puppies interacting with each other, you'll see them biting each other all the time. The problem is that they often mistake our hands and clothes and ankles as being just like their littermates.

How do we teach the pup not to do this to us? First, we'll start with some basic rules of how to interact with a young puppy:

-  Puppies might see your hands the way they'd see each others' jaws. Don't wave your hands around the pup's face or grab at her. Use your hands to pick up toys (just as you'd like the pup to do) or for soft, gentle petting.
-  Don't play "chase-me" games where you and the puppy chase and grab at each other.
-  Play with lots of toys - you can play tug-of-war, fetch, and chase games with them (see the [Games](#) page for more information).
-  Make sure the puppy is getting enough exercise. How much is "enough"? Probably more than you think - at least 40 minutes to an hour of running and playing a day.

Puppies LOVE to play - that's what they live for. What's the worst thing that could happen to them? Play ending. So that's how we will "punish" them for being too rough - by suddenly making play stop when they bite. The rule is "*All fun and games end when puppy teeth touch human skin*".

Pups bite because it is fun, it's their way of playing, and it gains them attention. So, to punish the puppy, all we have to do is make the fun end. If you're playing with your pup and his teeth touch you, yelp loudly and shrilly like a hurt puppy. (If this makes him MORE excited, or if you're a guy who can't really do this, BELLOW like he's really hurt you). *Immediately* disengage yourself from him, and as calmly as you can, leave the pup behind (in a safe, [puppy-proof place](#)). Give him the cold shoulder. You only have to leave him for a little

bit (less than 5 minutes, probably).

Meanwhile, make sure that your pup is getting lots of praise and attention when he is playing well and gently. Pups sometimes learn to bite you to get attention, so make sure that they are getting rewarded with attention when they're being good, not when they're being bad.

If the biting is really bad, you might also want to spray the back of your hands (or clothes he's going after) with Bitter Apple. If your puppy backs off from biting at it, PRAISE him: "What a good boy, that IS disgusting, isn't it!" Immediately redirect his toothy attention to a more appropriate item (like a toy). (I only spray the backs of my hands because I don't want to get the nasty flavor on any treats that I may be handing out, bearing in mind that any time you are interacting with a puppy you are teaching him what actions have good consequences and which ones don't - so I always have a treat ready to reward the types of behaviors I want to encourage.)

I mentioned above to make sure that the puppy is getting enough exercise. I can't emphasize this enough - you'll be amazed by what a difference it makes. I recommend bringing your pup to a supervised "Puppy Socialization" event (see [here](#)), any park where people bring friendly dogs for socialization, or invite over friendly, healthy dogs belonging to your friends and neighbors for a play date. . Let your puppy run and play and wrestle with other dogs. It will tire him out, and other dogs will be SURE to tell him when his needle-sharp puppy teeth are being used inappropriately! (See our [Dog Parks Page](#) for some cautions about using official off-leash play areas.)

Meanwhile, you can start teaching your pup to sit and lie down on command. As your pup gets good at responding to these cues, you can use them to calm him down when he starts forgetting himself and using his mouth too hard.

Please note that it's important that puppies learn that they can control the strength of their jaws and the way that they use them. You really do NOT want your pup to never bite you because then he will never learn how to bite softly. This is called "bite inhibition". In your pup's lifetime, he will probably be put in the position where he feels he needs to bite - this is the only way that dogs have to show that they are very upset. Your goal is to teach your pup that he can grasp with his jaws without breaking skin. (As a clumsy dog owner, I have been known to accidentally step on my own dogs' tails. Instinctively, they will usually put their jaws where the pain was - but since they have good bite inhibition, they merely grasp with their jaws instead of biting).

It's important that you notice and reward good behavior and appropriate play. Brenda Aloff, of Heaven on Arf, calls this *Opportunity Training*: When the opportunity to reward good behavior knocks, open the door and give your pup a reward!

A note about children: Young children and young puppies must *always* be supervised when they are together. The fast, unpredictable movements of children often excite puppies. When puppies accidentally hurt them (and they almost always will, eventually), children tend to scream in a way that excites puppies further, and often run away or wave their arms - causing the pup to want to bite them again. Teach young children to move slowly around dogs so that they don't over-stimulate them, and teach them to "freeze" when the pup starts to get too excited - before the pup starts to bite. When the kids and the pups are playing together, set up a situation where it will be easy to separate them quickly - maybe a door the child can slip through, or a baby gate you can pop the puppy over when he gets too rambunctious. A good idea (from Nancy Beach) is to make it a rule that there is always a toy between the child and the dog - that neither one sees the body of the other as a play object for direct manipulation. (See the [KADIE website](#) for more information on teaching children to be safe around dogs.)

Also, a note about orphans, singletons, and pups who leave their litter mates early: Puppies learn a lot about controlling their jaws from their littermates and mothers. Pups who were abandoned, born alone, or removed from their litter at an early age are more likely to have issues with biting and mouthing. One recommendation is to find "replacement littermates", dogs of a similar age or size, or with the kind of temperament that will put up with a rude pup, that this pup can interact with to make up this learning.

Puppy biting is normal and most pups will grow out of it eventually, but take the time to teach them that humans do not put up with it.

See also [Shirley's Bite Inhibition article](#).

Return to [Training Tips](#)

or if you have a young puppy you're probably interested in these other Training Tips: [Housetraining Your Puppy](#) and [House Proofing Your Puppy](#).



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