

PUPPY BITING and CHEWING
CARVER STREET ANIMAL HOSPITAL
2703 WEST CARVER ST.
DURHAM, NC 27705

Why is my puppy nipping and biting family members?

Although often thought to be a teething behavior, nipping, mouthing and biting in young dogs is generally a form of social play. Teething is more likely to involve gnawing or chewing on household objects. The first thing you must do is provide ample opportunity for play, without biting. Social play with people could involve chase and retrieve games, as well as long walks. Although wrestling and tug of war games can be fun, they may lead to play that is too rough or rambunctious. Puppies need to learn bite inhibition. This is something they start to learn while with their littermates. It is one reason that puppies should not go to new homes until 7 - 8 weeks and they have had time to practice social skills with other dogs. It can therefore be extremely beneficial for the puppy to have regular interactive social play periods with other dogs or puppies in the home or in the neighborhood. (See our handout Play and Exercise in dogs for additional information).

How can I stop play biting?

Provided the dog is receiving adequate play, attention and exercise, you can turn the training to bite inhibition. One of the things that they need to learn is how much pressure from their jaws causes pain. Without this feedback, a puppy does not learn to inhibit the force of its bite. Because **all** dogs can and will bite at some time, this lesson is vital for human safety.

How is this lesson taught? When puppies play with each other, if puppy A bites on puppy B too hard, puppy B will yelp. If that does not work, puppy B will leave. This sends the message to puppy that its' bites were too hard and if it wishes to continue to play, it needs to be gentle. However, people often **do not** send this message to their puppy. In the beginning, they often allow the puppy to chew on them without reprimands and the puppy assumes that the behavior is acceptable.

Instead, the message people should send is that mouthing and chewing on hands is painful. To do this, often all that is necessary is for **all** family members to emit a sharp "yip" and cease all play and attention immediately. This sends the message to the puppy that the bites are painful and that biting will cause play to be terminated. When consistently administered this will often stop playful biting. This training often works for those family members that are a little more forceful and assertive and who are immediate and consistent in their training. If the puppy persists, chases or immediately repeats the behavior, closing a door and walking out of the room can help to teach the puppy that nipping leads to immediate inattention.

What if yelping does not help?

Other techniques are often suggested for play biting. Some involve harsh discipline, like slapping the puppy under the chin or forcefully holding the mouth closed. Remember, pain can cause aggression and cause the puppy to become anxious, fearful or perhaps more excited. These techniques also require that you grab an excited puppy; not an easy thing to do. Some puppies may even misinterpret the owner's attempts at punishment as rough play, which in turn might lead to an increase in the behavior. **Physical methods are therefore not recommended.** Owners who cannot inhibit the puppy with a yelp, could consider a shake can, electronic alarm, air horn, or ultrasonic device, as soon as the biting becomes excessive.

The use of a head halter with a remote leash attached allows the puppy to play and chew, but a quick pull on the leash can immediately and successfully close the mouth and stop biting without any physical force. By simultaneously saying "no biting", most puppies will quickly learn the meaning of the command. As soon as the puppy stops and calms down, the owner can allow play to resume, as long as biting does not begin again.

Remember that play biting is a component of play behavior in puppies. Play is a form of social interaction. Realize that your puppy is trying to play with you even though the behavior is rough. To ensure that you are in control, be certain that each play session is initiated by you and not the puppy, and that you can end each session whenever you choose. One effective strategy when the play gets too rough is to immediately end the play session and leave. Social withdrawal can be a very powerful tool. Leave the puppy alone long enough to calm down. If upon your return the wild playing begins again, leave again. Although it is tempting to pick the puppy up and take it out of the room, this interaction may be interpreted by your puppy as additional play and the biting may continue as you carry the puppy to a confinement location.

Why do puppies chew?

Dogs, especially puppies are extremely playful and investigative. While play with people and other dogs is an important part of socialization and social development, exploration and object play are important ways for dogs to learn about their environment. Therefore it is a normal behavior for puppies to investigate their environment by sniffing, tasting and perhaps chewing on objects throughout the home. Dogs that chew may also be scavenging for food (as in garbage raiding), playing (as in the dog that chews apart a book or couch), teething (dogs 3 to 6 months of age that chew on household objects), or satisfying a natural urge to chew and gnaw (which may serve to help keep teeth and gums healthy). Some dogs may chew because they receive attention (even if it is negative) or treats from the owners each time they chew, and the owners are inadvertently rewarding the behavior. Chewing and destructive behaviors may also be a response to anxiety. Dogs that are confined in areas where they are insecure may dig and chew in an attempt to escape. Dogs that are in a state of conflict, arousal or anxiety, such as separation anxiety, may turn to chewing and other forms of destructiveness as an outlet. (See our handout on Separation anxiety (dogs) for this specific problem).

How can chewing be treated?

First, determine why the dog is chewing. If the dog is a puppy or young adult dog that is chewing at a variety of objects in the household, it is likely that play and investigation (and perhaps teething) is the motive. Dogs that raid garbage and steal food off counters are obviously motivated by the presence and odor of food. Some dogs are attempting to escape confinement while in others chewing may be an outlet for anxiety. Determining the cause and motivation for chewing is therefore essential in developing a treatment strategy. Directing the chewing into appealing alternatives, sufficient play and exercise, and prevention of inappropriate chewing are needed for the exploratory dog. You must ensure that you are not inadvertently rewarding the behavior. Inattention or disruption devices may be useful for these dogs. If the dog is a puppy this behavior may decrease in time, provided you direct the chewing to proper outlets. Dogs that are garbage raiding or food stealing need to be treated by supervision, prevention and booby traps, since the behavior itself is self-rewarding. Dogs that are destructive to escape confinement must learn to become comfortable and secure with the cage or room where they are to be confined. Alternatively a new confinement area may have to be chosen. Dogs that are destructive as an outlet for anxiety, will need to have the cause of the anxiety diagnosed, and the problem appropriately treated. (See our handout on Separation anxiety - dogs).

How can proper chewing be encouraged?

Before considering how inappropriate chewing might be discouraged the real key is to provide some appropriate outlets for your dog's chewing "needs." Begin with a few toys with a variety of tastes, odors, and textures to determine what appeals most to the pet. Although plastic, nylon or rubber toys may be the most durable, products that can be torn apart such as rawhide or pigs ears may be more like the natural prey and wood products that attract most dogs. However, one must keep in mind that dogs may fight with other dogs or people over animal products. Additionally, there is a wide range of quality among rawhides and pigs ears.

Numerous play toys are also available that provide a means for stuffing food or treats inside, so that the dog has to "work" to get its reward. Since dogs, especially young puppies are strongly motivated to chew, it is important to provide a variety of chew toys. A chew toy can also help maintain good dental health. Find a few products that are safe, durable and that appeal to your dog. Each dog is an individual. Nylabone® makes a variety of rubber, rope, nylon and compressed bone toys that have been designed for both chewing and dental care. Pedigree® Dentabones and chew toys made of hide are also appealing to most dogs and can help reduce tartar. Coating the toys with some type of flavored spread (cheese, liver, peanut butter) may help kindle the dog's interest. For dogs that chew on everything but their dog toys, it might also be possible to increase the appeal by utilizing toys that are designed so that food or treats can be stuffed inside. Some of the newer toys such as the Kong®, Goodie Ship™, Space Ball™, Buster Cube™, Home Alone Food Ball™ and Activity Ball™ have even been designed so that food can be stuffed inside.

To ensure that your puppy is encouraged and rewarded for chewing on its toys, and discouraged from chewing on all other objects, it must be supervised at all times. Whenever supervision is not possible, you must prevent access to any object or area that might be chewed. Although play periods and chew toys may be sufficient for most pets, additional activities such as self-feeders, other pets, interactive toys, and even videos may help to keep pets occupied.

How else can my puppy's activity be reduced?

The needs of most working dogs are usually satisfied with daily work sessions (retrieving, herding, sledding, etc), while non-working house-pets will require alternative forms of activity to meet their requirements for work and play. Games such as tug-of-war, retrieving, catching a ball or Frisbee, jogging, or even long walks are often an acceptable alternative to work, allow the dog an opportunity to expend unused energy, and provide regular attention periods. Obedience training, agility classes and simply teaching your dog a few tricks are not only pleasant interactive activities for you and your dog, but they also provide some stimulation and "work" to the dog's daily schedule.

How can I stop the chewing on household objects?

Access to all areas that the dog might chew must be prevented unless the owner is present to supervise, or the area is effectively booby-trapped. Your dog can only be punished for chewing if it is caught in the act. Even then, punishment must be humane, immediate and effective. A shake can, verbal reprimand, or alarm (audible or ultrasonic) can deter the pet in your presence, but the behavior will continue in your absence. Remote punishment (where the owner is out of sight while administering punishment) may teach the dog that the behavior itself is inappropriate (see our handout on Canine punishment). A head halter and long remote leash pulled each time the dog chews, a water rifle, or one of the audible or ultrasonic alarms, may be effective. However, none of these products are practical when the owner is absent or cannot supervise. Arriving home and punishing a pet for an act that is already completed will only serve to increase the pet's anxiety.

The only way that chewing might be deterred when your dog cannot be supervised, is to booby-trap the areas where the dog might chew. To be successful the punishment must be noxious enough to immediately deter the pet. Taste or odor aversion is often the simplest and most practical type of booby

trap but many pets will have to be conditioned in advance to detest the smell or taste by squirting anti-chew spray (bitter apple, Ropel™) into the pet's mouth or across its nose. A small amount of cayenne pepper mixed with water, oil of citronella or commercial anti-chew sprays may also be successful as deterrents. Alternatively the spray could be placed on any object that the dog might chew and a fishing line can be attached from the object to a stack of empty cans on a nearby table or counter. At the instant chewing begins the stack will come crashing down. Most dogs are then conditioned after a few events to avoid the particular taste or odor for fear of another "can attack".

What if the dog continues to chew household objects?

Whenever you cannot supervise or monitor your dog's behavior, he or she should be confined to a cage or dog-proof room with any potential chewing sites effectively booby trapped.