



Teaching Bite Inhibition

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I'm nursing several tiny, painful wounds that a puppy inflicted on my fingers when I taught last night's Good Manners Class. As wonderful as puppies are, they're inevitably equipped with devilishly sharp needle-teeth. Some pups are gentle with their miniature daggers, while others should be required to carry concealed weapons permits.

If you're blessed with a soft-mouthed pup, thank the heavens! If on the other hand, you have a puppy who enjoys perforating your skin, don't despair. You're not alone, and you can teach bite inhibition -- the dog's ability to control the force of his bite.

Puppies who bite gently already have good bite inhibition, a valuable behavior you should encourage. Those who are sharky need to learn inhibition while they're still young. Dogs who don't are at higher risk for doing damage as adults. Dogs who bite and injure humans tend to have short life spans. Along with lots of socialization, instilling bite inhibition is one of the best things you can do to ensure your puppy has a long, happy life. He'll be less likely to find himself in a position where he's compelled to bite.

Nature has equipped puppy mouths with sharp tools for several reasons. Puppies explore the world with their mouths. Does it taste good? Feel good? Oh boy, let's chew on that some more! Does it taste bad or cause something bad to happen? Oh no, let's not make that mistake again! A puppy's very first mouth experience is nursing from his mother after the entire litter is born. That feels and tastes soothing indeed. Because puppies are born without teeth, they clamp down and suck on their mother's nipples without causing her discomfort.

It's a different story, however, when those 28 needle-sharp baby teeth begin to erupt through the gums around 3 weeks of age. Mom becomes less tolerant when her pack of juniors starts drawing blood. She may get up and walk away if they bite down too hard. This early lesson in negative punishment -- the pup's behavior makes a good

thing go away -- teaches pups that, if they want the milk bar to stay open, they'd best be gentle. Mom may even snap at a particular pup if he continues to bite too hard -- positive punishment -- pup's behavior makes a bad thing happen -- again sending the message he'd better lighten up if he wants to nurse.

The next bite inhibition lessons occur at 5 to 8 weeks, when he starts to engage in rowdy play with siblings. Puppies will yip if an overeager playmate chomps down too hard and may snap at or choose not to play with the offender for a time. Nature's lessons in positive and negative punishment are effective to some degree. The biting pup learns to soften his mouth if he wants to play with his pals. One behavior theory holds that puppies' teeth are needle-sharp on purpose, so they'll learn bite inhibition. It's not conducive to survival to have pack members shredding each other.

How is it, then, we end up with nippy, mouthy puppies when Mom and siblings have done the work for us? For starters, many breeders send their pups to new homes far too early. I cringe when clients says they got their pup at 5 or 6 weeks of age. I know this baby dog has missed out on important lessons with Mom and siblings. He's now a prime candidate for bite inhibition work. Singleton puppies -- pups without littermates -- and orphan puppies are also at risk for low bite inhibition.

In addition, dogs don't immediately generalize their lessons to other applications. A pup who learned to control his bite with Mom and siblings may need assistance to transfer the concept to humans. This pup will be easier to teach to use his mouth gently with people than one who missed all his early lessons, but still he needs considerable help.

It's important to do bite inhibition work humanely. Humans are poorly skilled in canine communication; clumsy attempts to use positive punishment to correct biting can and do often backfire. Forceful techniques, such as hitting, shaking, holding his muzzle closed or forcing the puppy onto his back until he stops struggling can injure him and result in fearful or aggressive behavior. It's more effective and safer to use negative punishment by letting the pup know that, when he bites too hard, good stuff goes away. In this case, you're the good stuff.

If after undertaking the four steps to bite inhibition covered in the sidebar, your pup is still a Great White Shark -- if he latches onto your pants leg or leaps up and snags your dangling fingers and won't let go when you try to walk away -- you need additional management tools.

The tether is my favorite. It's a 4- to 5-foot-long, nylon-coated cable with snaps at both ends. One end snaps to your puppy's collar. The other snaps to an eyebolt screwed securely into the wall or wrapped around the leg of a heavy piece of furniture. When your pup is tethered, you can step out of reach of snapping jaws until he calms down -- he can't follow you. Return and play again. If he bites too hard, say "Ouch!" and

step out of reach. This handy tool allows you to remain in the room and keep the pup out of trouble during a time-out.

Tug-of-war is another useful tool. Although some training books warn against the game, many trainers encourage it. Dogs have an inherent need to bite, chew and tug. By teaching your pup to play by your rules, you direct this natural behavior into acceptable channels. (See sidebar.) When he's in a total shark-attack mood and your ouches and time-outs don't work, redirect the biting into an appropriate tug game.

You can also use treats to reduce hard biting. If your pup leaves your fingers bleeding when he surgically removes a treat from them, close your fist over a treat so he can't get to it and let him bite. If he's really biting hard, use gloves. When his bite starts to soften, say "Yes!" and open your hand to feed him the treat from your palm. Now hide another treat in your closed fist and try it again. Many repetitions will teach him that a soft mouth gets the treat – a hard mouth doesn't. If the concept doesn't transfer from eating treats from your palm to taking treats from your fingers, buy metal finger splints from your pharmacy and feed treats with those on your fingers for a while. Most dogs aren't fond of the feel of metal against their teeth and will learn to be easy on your fingers.

Another useful tool is an awareness of your puppy's moods and activity levels. Puppies develop a routine with periods of high activity, often morning and evening -- when hard biting is more likely -- and periods of low activity, usually midday -- when teeth are likely to be gentle. Note your pup's personal rhythms. Save cuddle and grooming sessions for calm periods. Play tug or fetch repeatedly during high-energy times.

One final management word: Puppies should never play high-energy games with small children. Children run and scream when puppies bite because puppy teeth are painful to tender toddler skin. The pup thinks chasing after screaming children is a great game, and he's positively reinforced – biting makes the fun start! Children should play calm games with your puppy in his low-energy times. "Sit for a cookie" is a great game. Kids love to play "Junior Dog Trainer." It thrills them to see puppies respond their cues. Children should always be under direct supervision when dogs are near. Never, ever, leave a child unattended with a dog or puppy, regardless of how gentle the dog, even for a few seconds.

An adult dog who missed early bite lessons can learn to be careful with his teeth, using the same tools and exercises. It's likely to take longer to undo behaviors he's spent years practicing. In times of stress, he's more likely to revert back and chomp down.

It's amazing dogs don't bite more often. It's a natural, normal behavior for them. Don't expect your puppy to give it up all at once. Your goal is first to get him to bite a

little more softly, then even more softly and finally, as the overwhelming puppy urge to chew on everything begins to wane, not to bite at all.

By laying the soft-bite foundation, you make it more likely that, if your dog is someday teased or tormented into biting, the lesson to bite softly will be so well-programmed into his brain that little, if any, damage will be done. While the tormentor might deserve a hearty bite, your dog's future will be brighter if he doesn't inflict damage, no matter how well deserved the bite may be.

SIDEBAR: STEPS TO TEACH BITE INHIBITION

Paradoxically, your pup can't learn to control the force of his bite if he never bites. To begin his bite inhibition training, you have to let him bite you. When the day comes circumstances cause him to bite – and all dogs will bite given a certain

set of circumstances – he will know how to pull his punches. Here are four easy steps to teach him:

1. Rather than stopping your puppy from mouthing you, let him mouth gently. As long as it doesn't hurt, keep playing.
2. If he bites down hard enough that it hurts, calmly say "Ouch!" to mark the inappropriate behavior, and gently remove your body part from his mouth. If the "Ouch!" prompts him to lighten up, praise and continue playing.
3. If he resists letting go of your flesh, offer a treat or desirable toy and praise him.
4. If he's only moderately sharky, say "Ouch!" and distract him with a toy. Then give him a time-out just like Mom did, getting up, turning and walking away for a minute or two. Step into another room, if necessary, as long as you know he's safe in his own puppy-proofed room or pen. When you return, play with him again.

Remember, repetition is important in each of these steps.

SIDEBAR 2: RULES FOR TUGGING

Dogs love to bite and tug, and some owners love to play high-energy rough-and-tumble type games with their dogs. Tug-of-war is a great compromise game – an appropriate outlet for energy – as long as rules are clear and all players follow them.

The tug toy is brought out only for the tug game when the *human* says it's time to play. The wise human brings the toy out in anticipation of his dog's peak times in his energy cycle.

The tug toy is well-designed – long enough to keep dog teeth far away from human flesh, made of a soft material inviting for a dog to grab and hold, with a comfortable handle for the human to grip.

The dog grabs the tug toy only when the human gives him the cue – a word or phrase such as “Tug!” or “Take it.”

If the dog tries to grab the toy before the cue is given, the toy vanishes behind the human's back. The human gives the tug cue when the dog can stand or sit quietly without leaping or lunging when the toy is brought out.

The human wins the game 80 to 95 percent of the time. The more assertive the dog, the less often he should win. “Winning” is getting the dog to let go, leaving

the human in possession of the toy. Teach your dog a reliable “Give” cue outside the tug environment before trying to play the game. It's OK to offer a treat to motivate the dog to let go of the toy.

If the dog's teeth touch human skin or clothing, the game's over. “Oops, time out” and the toy goes away – for at least a minute or two. That's negative punishment: The dog's behavior – touching the human with his teeth – makes the good thing vanish. After a minute of time out, the human can start the game again.

When the human is ready to end the game, the toy's put away, until it's time to play again.

Happy tugging!

SIDEBAR 3: PUPPY TEETH

By the time they're about 8 weeks old, most puppies will have all their sharp 28 deciduous, or temporary teeth. These premolars, canines and incisors start falling

out when the pups reach 3 to 4 months of age. Pups often swallow these baby teeth as they fall out; the roots are absorbed. Their adult teeth – 42 of them, including molars – will have grown in at around 7½ months.

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Peaceable Paws LLC

Pat Miller, CBCC-KA, CPDT-KA

301-582-9420

pat@PeaceablePaws.com

www.peaceablepaws.com

Pat Miller is a Certified Behavior Consultant, Canine (KA), Certified Professional Dog Trainer (KA), past president of the Association of Professional Dog Trainers (US) and past board member of the Certification Council for Professional Dog Trainers. Miller worked at the Marin Humane Society in Novato, California from 1976 to 1996, first as a volunteer, then in customer service, as a humane officer, Customer Service Supervisor, Field Supervisor, and for the final ten years as Director of Operations. During this time, she obtained an Associate Degree in Administration of Justice and a BS in Business Administration. In 1996 Miller left the Humane Society to launch Peaceable Paws in Monterey, California.

Miller now offers group good manners classes, private training and behavior modification services, dog training workshops and trainer academies at her Peaceable Paws 80-acre training facility in Fairplay, Maryland, where she and her husband Paul live with their three dogs, eight cats, four horses, five chickens, and a pot-bellied pig. In addition, Miller presents seminars and workshops around the world on a variety of training and behavior topics. She has authored seven books on dog behavior and training: "The Power of Positive Dog Training," "Positive Perspectives," "Positive Perspectives 2," "Play With Your Dog," "Do-Over Dogs," "How to Foster Dogs" and "Beware of the Dog." Miller is training editor for *The Whole Dog Journal*, and also writes for several other publications, www.peaceablepaws.com

In May of 2015, Pat was named by Dog Fancy Magazine as one of 45 people who have changed the dog world.