



Peninsula Humane Society & SPCA

Teaching a Puppy Not to Bite

Causes

Much of a puppy's early life is spent rough-housing and play-fighting with her littermates. The pups roll AROUND, trying to bite each other's legs, ears, tail, and scruff. Eventually, one puppy bites another too hard, and the one who is bitten lets out a sharp, high-pitched yelp. The biter is usually startled by the sudden, loud noise, and the play session momentarily ends. After a while, the pushy pup learns that it is her own overly rambunctious and aggressive behavior that causes the frightening noise and the end of a fun game. This is how dogs learn to play and bite each other gently. Using this same method, we can teach the puppy that biting humans is wrong.

Treatment

Take time to play-fight and roughhouse with your puppy. Each and every time she bites too hard, immediately let out a high-pitched screech, then walk away and ignore her for a few minutes. The pup will learn that it is her own overly aggressive behavior that leads to the reprimand. Hitting the pup is not a good idea; in fact, hitting or smacking causes some puppies to become more aggressive because they think it's all part of the game. A yelp and the abrupt end of play are reprimands that puppies naturally understand. Once the pup learns not to bite hard, we can teach her not to inflict even a soft bite on humans. Pretend you have the hands and fingers of a two-month-old infant. Now a bite with any pressure at all will hurt. Your puppy will gradually learn that she must be extremely gentle with all humans.

Puppies often bite as a way of telling you that they are frightened or that they don't like what you are doing to them. If you touch your pup in a sensitive area, or handle her in a way she finds threatening, she may growl or bite as a way of telling you, "Quit it." To prevent or stop this behavior, you should train your dog not only to accept handling but actually to enjoy it. She needs to get used to being handled so she will not squirm and bite when she is groomed, examined by a veterinarian, or just touched and petted by overly affectionate people, especially children.

Start slowly and gently. Scratch your puppy behind the ears, then gently look inside the ear. Massage the shoulder and leg, work down towards the foot, then inspect the toes and nails. When the pup accepts the handling, praise her lavishly and offer a treat. Gradually work your hands over her entire body. Pay attention to sensitive spots, and give an especially tasty treat whenever you touch one of these areas. Soon, your pup will look forward to being touched on previously sensitive areas. Gradually accustom the pup to more vigorous handling by praising and rewarding all good behavior.

For more info, call our free Behavior Helpline (650/340-7022 x783 or, for Spanish, x786) or consider a low-cost consultation. To make a consultation appointment, call 650/340-7022 x667. The PHS/SPCA Behavior Department, like many shelter programs, is funded by donations.