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Help! My Puppy Bites!

The principles outlined in this handout are intended as a general guide only and should be applied under the supervision of an Accredited CGC™ Instructor.

This program is for normal puppy play-biting and mouthing. It is not a program for aggressive dogs. If your dog has shown aggressive behaviour toward you, your family, or other people, you should speak with the Instructor listed at the top of this handout.



If you have a new puppy in your household, then the chances are you have been the victim of puppy play-biting. This is something that most people accept as being a natural part of puppy behaviour. And it is natural - however you must teach your puppy (let's call him "Deefer") that it is not acceptable!

Why isn't play-biting acceptable?

As a puppy Deefer has very sharp teeth but only a weak jaw. This means that his puppy bite may be a little uncomfortable but normally can't do any real damage. As an adult dog however, Deefer has larger teeth and a relatively powerful jaw. Other dogs may tolerate Deefer's play-bites because doggy skin is generally tougher than human skin, so dogs aren't injured as easily. However if Deefer bites human skin he can do a lot of damage - even if he is "only playing".

Adult dogs also tend to be larger than the average puppy, usually being on a similar level to a child's face. So if a child is playing with Deefer and he bites, chances are it will be a bite to the face. Even if he bites at an arm or leg he will probably cause physical and emotional trauma to the child. In this case Deefer may end up being euthanised and the child will almost certainly be scarred. Not a nice scenario.

This is why it is essential that Deefer learns not to bite whilst he is still a puppy. Puppies who play-bite with each other may be cute to watch, but they are playing a very dangerous game when they do this with humans.

Why does Deefer play-bite?

Deefer and his litter-mates grow quickly after they are born. They soon move around and come into contact with each other. As they grow older they begin to mouth and bite at each other.



They spend a lot of time play-biting and grabbing each other with their mouths - this is all practice in survival skills. They have to learn how to use their mouths appropriately as this is their only real means of grasping anything.





The puppies also learn not to bite their litter-mates too hard. If you watch them playing you will see that if Deefer bites another pup too hard, the pup on the receiving end of the bite will let out a yelp and stop playing with Deefer. This teaches Deefer that if he wants to continue playing he must be softer with his mouth - we call this "bite inhibition".

When Deefer comes home to you as a new puppy he may well want to play-bite and mouth you. This is a natural extension of his play with his litter-mates. However Deefer must learn that you will not accept this behaviour and that he must modify his behaviour to suit you.

Everyone has a different perception of what is acceptable. Some people are happy for Deefer to mouth them when they are playing with him, as long as he doesn't bear down with his teeth. However we suggest that most people should not accept Deefer mouthing them at all, as he may become confused about who he is, and isn't, allowed to mouth.

What can we do to stop Deefer from biting?

There are a few different methods we can use to teach Deefer to inhibit his bite:

-  "Ouch" That hurt!
-  Time out
-  "Leave"
-  Settle or calm



We have found that a combination of these methods works best and that they must be used every time Deefer bites or you will be sending him the message that it's okay to bite sometimes. Consistency is the key to bite inhibition. Set your house rules and stick to them!

Let's look at each of these methods in more detail:

"OUCH! That hurt!":

This is the same method as that used by Deefer's litter-mates and usually works well for unexpected mouthing or biting. Every time Deefer touches you with his teeth, squeak "OUCH!" in a high pitched, loud voice (like the puppies). You must react the moment you feel his teeth and ensure you squeak loudly enough to cause him to withdraw his teeth. You should also withdraw your hand when you squeak and ignore Deefer for around 10 seconds.



In most cases Deefer will look a little startled and will often lick your hand in an attempt to appease you. If he does this you may resume playing, remembering to repeat your performance if he bites again.

However if Deefer persists in biting you will need to put the "Time out" method into practice as well.

Time Out:



Time out involves withdrawing your attention from Deefer when he mouths or bites. This can be an effective method when combined with "Ouch!".

So, if Deefer is biting, turn your back and ignore him for around 5 to 10 seconds to allow him to settle. If Deefer is very persistent you may have to leave the

room or go elsewhere for the time out period so that Deefer gets no attention from you whatsoever.

At the end of the time out session simply resume the activity you were engaged in. 5 to 10 seconds is normally long enough to give Deefer time to settle down - if you take much longer than this to return Deefer will probably forget that he was even playing with you and the lesson may be wasted!

Remember to keep time out short and ensure you return to Deefer when he is quiet and calm, not noisy and boisterous. Time out may have to be repeated on numerous occasions for Deefer to understand and is best used in conjunction with the "Ouch! That Hurt!" method.

"Leave":

This method is best taught as a game. Start by giving Deefer a small piece of a very tempting treat to let him know what is available as a reward. Place another treat on the palm of your hand and offer it to Deefer to smell. This time however you must close your fist before he can take the treat. Do not withdraw your fist, just keep it closed and allow him to sniff at your hand.

Deefer will probably attempt to get the food but if you keep your fist closed he won't get the food and he won't get a grip on your hand to damage your skin. As soon as Deefer hesitates or pauses in his attempts to get the food, reward him with a treat from your other hand. Repeat this game until Deefer is no longer trying to take the food but is waiting and possibly watching you for your response. Make sure you swap hands as well, so that Deefer learns that this game applies to both hands.

At this stage introduce the key words "Leave" as he withdraws his nose from your fist and then "Take-it" or similar as you reward him from the other hand. Playing this game will teach Deefer to ignore your fist when you say "Leave" - this is the response we want him to learn.

Once Deefer has learnt that "Leave" means "don't touch", he can be asked to "Leave" when he is play-biting. This method works best when you can anticipate that Deefer is going to bite. It comes in very handy for situations where you can see Deefer may be tempted to bite - or perhaps to snatch food from a child. If you have reinforced "Leave" plenty of times then you can request that he "Leave" whatever is exciting him.

It is always best to provide Deefer with an alternative behaviour if you have requested him to "Leave" something. Perhaps "Leave" followed by "Come" or "Sit" and then a reward for complying with your request. This way Deefer is not left to his own devices to figure out what he should do after "Leaving"!

"Settle" or "Be Calm":

Whilst not actually targeting bite inhibition, teaching Deefer to "settle" down or "be calm" can help if he is a very excitable puppy. The more excited Deefer becomes, the higher the chance of him biting, so you need to ensure that not every interaction with him is physically exciting.

To begin with, choose a time when Deefer is fairly tired and willing to be compliant. Gently massage him with *slow* strokes all over - you are aiming to relax him. If he mouths at your hands you are probably stroking too quickly - try even slower circular motions, or gently lifting his skin away from his body. This works particularly well across his back, as the skin here is generally fairly loose and pliable.



As Deefer begins to relax, talk soothingly to him while you massage, telling him to "settle" or "be calm". After a few sessions he will begin to associate calm behaviour with your verbal request. Eventually you may even find he flops to his side and goes to sleep when you ask him to settle! If Deefer settles on request, you can request this as an alternative behaviour after asking him to "Leave".

Other ideas:

- ✎ Transferring Deefer's attention to a chew-toy is another method you can use to teach him not to treat you as his personal chew-toy. If for example he is play-biting your hand, offer him a chew-toy instead.
- ✎ If Deefer is very excitable start by only playing quiet games that don't get him into a frenzy and don't encourage him to bite.

Why shouldn't I use physical punishment to stop Deefer's biting?

Some people will tell you to smack Deefer's nose if he bites at you, or to grab his muzzle and hold it shut while you "growl" at him.

These methods may deter Deefer from biting in the short term, but may cause problems in the long term, as Deefer will never be sure whether a hand coming toward him is going to pat, or smack! If he decides that it is going to punish him, he may display aggressive behaviour toward that human to defend himself from what he sees as a threat.

Young children in particular can become unintended victims of this punishment. They tend to wave their hands around more than adults and Deefer may decide they are threatening and react accordingly.

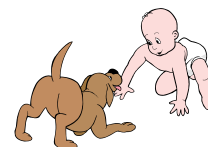
Humans punish with their hands, however Deefer punishes with his teeth - and his teeth can cause major damage. Far better for Deefer to learn that humans are friends, not foes!

So remember:

- ✎ You **MUST** react EVERY time you feel Deefer's teeth
- ✎ If the touch is unexpected use "Ouch! That hurt!"
- ✎ If you can anticipate the problem use "Leave"
- ✎ If you still feel the teeth it is time for "Time out"

YOU SHOULD ALSO:

- ✎ Always supervise Deefer when he is with children or visitors
- ✎ Protect Deefer from bad experiences with people who feel they need to "discipline" him
- ✎ Not allow people to encourage rough play from Deefer



AND

🐾 Never tell anyone that Deeper won't bite because:

**ANY DOG WILL BITE
GIVEN THE RIGHT (OR WRONG) CIRCUMSTANCES!**

Used consistently these methods should help to improve Deeper's bite inhibition. Reinforce your requirements at every opportunity, so that Deeper remembers the rules.

Remember that everyone in Deeper's household should commit to this program, as Deeper will be confused if some people allow him to bite and some don't.

If Deeper continues to mouth or bite, growls whilst he is biting, bruises or draws blood, or increases his biting, please speak with us immediately.



For more information on Canine Good Citizen™ training for your pet, contact the Instructor listed on the front page of this handout.

For more information on the Delta Society go to www.deltasocietyaustralia.com.au

Look for the other Handouts in the Delta "Help!" series:

- 🐾 Help! My Dog Jumps on Me!
- 🐾 Help! My Dog Needs Better Manners!
- 🐾 Help! My Dog Digs!
- 🐾 Help! How Do I Housetrain My Puppy?
- 🐾 Help! My Dog Barks!

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