

Your Puppy Nipping Guide ^{1/2}

Why Do Puppies Nip? Since puppies are born without hands, the only way they have to explore the world is with their mouths. And you may have noticed that your puppy is quite the explorer. Everything goes into those little mouths, including your fingers, and those baby teeth are like little needles. Ouch!

It's completely normal for puppies in their litters to bite each other in play. When they engage in this "bitey-face" game, they learn a little about how to inhibit the strength of their biting. If one puppy bites another too hard, that puppy probably will yelp and stop playing. If that happens enough times, the biter learns to apply less pressure.

But puppies are covered with fur and we're not. The same level of bite pressure that is appropriate during puppy play can hurt us and even break the skin. The inhibition they learn in the litter helps, but it's usually not enough to teach young puppies how to properly interact with humans.

How Do You Stop the Nipping? Some trainers will recommend that you hold your puppy's mouth closed, yell "No," or even push their cheeks into their teeth so that they hurt themselves. If you look at it from your puppy's point of view, this may teach them not to nip, but it also teaches them not to trust you. They're not being malicious when they nip you, they are simply doing what they are instinctively programmed to do. There are much better ways to deal with it that don't involve hurting your puppy and making her fearful of your hands coming near her face.



When puppies are biting us in play, it's because they are trying to interact with us in the only way they know how. What they want out of the behavior is for us to interact back. If you're saying, "No, don't, stop, cut it out!" and moving your hands all around to stay out of their reach, to the puppy you're simply playing back and encouraging them to go after those flying hands. They don't understand your words and moving targets are for chasing. The message you want to give your puppy instead is, "When you nip me, I will immediately STOP interacting with you."

Stop playing immediately. Don't wave your hands around but do remove them from your puppy's reach. When your pup is calm, you can slowly offer one hand to her mouth. At this point many puppies will lick the hand. This, or any behavior that is NOT biting, should be rewarded with continued attention and/or a food treat. But if you get another nip, redirect to a toy. Your puppy will soon learn the rules of the game. This lets them know gently that mouthy and nippy behavior doesn't get any attention, it simply makes me stop interacting or makes me go away.

Redirect Redirect and More Redirect! Having a puppy at home requires a certain amount of preparation. A key part of this preparation is having on hand, in lots of locations, appropriate toys, and chews that can be used to redirect nipping behavior. You need to be set up so as soon as, and whenever your puppy begins to nip you can immediately interceded with a toy. Use the toy to redirect your puppy from you to the toy. Encourage your puppy to grab the toy, play with the toy and bite the toy. This can become a fun game for you and your puppy. It not only teaches them that interacting with you is fun but it will also deter them from nipping at you. Here are a few examples of when having toys around is important so you can quickly intercept nipping and redirect it to a toy.

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- a. Playing with the puppy in the yard – Puppies can begin to jump, nip and grab at hands and clothing. Have a toy in your pocket or on hand to redirect this behavior
- b. Walking your puppy – Puppies can be fascinated the leash, your shoes or your trousers. Have a toy on hand to redirect the behavior

Enjoying puppy nap time – A relaxing nap on your knee and cuddle session can quickly turn into a puppy hand-bite-fest!. Always have a toy on hand to redirect any attempt to engage you with puppy nipping.

Track Your Puppy Nipping! Your puppy is not going to learn in one session that nipping is not appropriate and not appreciated. They simply do not learn this right away. She is biting because it is something she was programmed to do. At birth it's as unconscious a behavior to her as breathing. She has to learn first to connect to it as a voluntary behavior that she can control. That's why the initial pull-away after you stop interacting is often followed by another nip (if your hands are within nipping distance). It will take a lot of consistent repetition before your puppy is able to get to the stage where she lunges to nip but inhibits herself before making contact. If you and other family members keep a simple record of this nipping behavior you will see in time that it reduces in intensity and frequency. One day you will stop, think and realize that the nipping has ceased.

Children and Ankle-Biting It's hard for young children not to squeal, dance, wave their hands around and run when puppy is nipping at them. This, of course, delights the puppy and encourages her to continue her "playing." In this case, or if your puppy is persistent and continues to nip at your ankles when you walk away from her, let her drag a leash in the house (when supervised). After a nipping incident, you can tether the leash to a doorknob and walk out of her reach or move your children out of her reach. When she has calmed down, slowly and calmly approach and offer a hand for a lick. Licks (or non-biting behavior) get praise and continued attention. Nips make the people go away again. Make sure to supervise children so that they don't turn this into a rousing "tag" game, winding the puppy up and frustrating her! Movements away from her must be immediate and smooth, and movements towards her must be calm and purposeful.

Important Note - Puppies should be wearing a harness. Only tether a puppy for seconds while you find a redirect toy. Never teather a puppy from a collar!

No Rough-Housing with Hands! The most important thing you can do when your puppy is a little land-shark is to make sure that nobody in her world is rough-housing or wrestling with her **with their hands**. If this is happening, then no matter what else, you are confusing her with a game that in essence tells her, "Go for my hands!" Most puppies love to rough-house, and you can still do it. Just substitute a toy for your hands. While she's going after the toy if clumsy puppy misses and nips your skin or clothing, you can simply drop the toy and stop playing for a few seconds. That will also help teach her to be more careful with her mouthing.

The Bottom Line If you do absolutely nothing, chances are your puppy will outgrow this stage on her own. But if you are consistent, persistent and patient, reinforcing calm behavior and withdrawing attention for mouthy behavior, you may survive your dog's puppyhood with less tooth marks! Remember always actively supervise children around your puppy. Keep it fun, safe and educational for both kids and puppies!



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