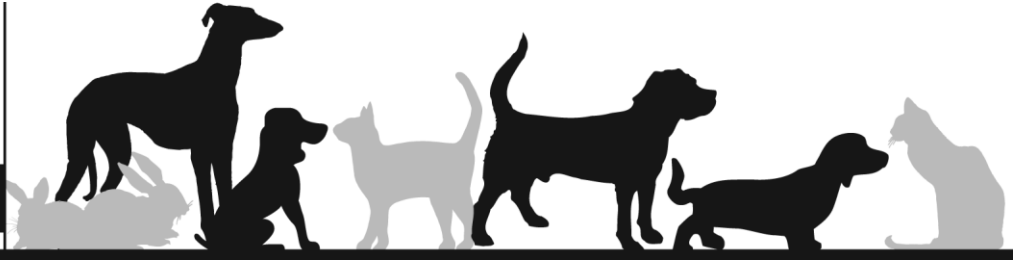




DOGS



Puppy Behavior: Nipping, Biting, and Rough Play

Puppies come into our homes with a lot to learn. They get started on learning their adult manners from their mother, littermates, and the people around them before they get to us, but we have to take it from there.

Puppies and Play

During "play fights" with their litter mates, puppies begin to develop their hunting and defense skills, including chasing, pouncing, and nipping. They also learn how to mind their manners with other dogs. If one puppy bites another one hard enough to hurt, the other puppy will squeal and stop playing with that puppy briefly, sending a message to back off.

With this feedback, puppies learn to control their bite pressure and to keep from getting too rough during play. These are important skills for your dog, since a dog that plays too rough is not welcomed by other dogs – or their owners.

Your puppy should learn early, though, that even playful nipping is a no-no when it comes to interacting with humans. The same thing goes for other rough play behavior like jumping up, charging, or bumping: those may be okay for play with other dogs, but not for play with humans. And it's up to you as the owner to teach your pup how to interact appropriately with people.

Teaching Puppy to Play Nice

When you play with your pup, be sure to have an acceptable chew toy readily at hand. Any time during the play session, if your dog's teeth touch your hands or any other part of you, freeze and interrupt the nipping behavior with a sharp sound like "Ah-ah!" or "Hey!"

If the pup backs off when you interrupt, redirect their nipping to the toy. Repeat the procedure if the dog starts nipping you again.

If the puppy doesn't back off when you interrupt, though, you'll need to take a time-out from the game. Fold your arms and turn your head away to give a "game's over" signal to the dog. Don't push your puppy away with your hands or scold them, as this can seem like part of the game to the dog and encourage further nipping.

If they continue to pounce and nip, stand and walk away. Give your dog a minute or two to realize they've lost a playmate, and ignore the dog's efforts to re-engage you. Don't return to the game until the dog has been calm and quiet for 10 to 15 seconds.

It may help to tether the dog to a piece of furniture using a leash and harness while you're playing with them. That way, if they get too rambunctious or mouthy, you can easily turn away and move out of range until they settle down.

Don't worry that you're penalizing your dog for touching you with their teeth "by accident." Your pup can learn to be aware of and control what they're doing with their mouth and teeth, even in the excitement of play.

Tug of War

If you want to allow your pup to get rowdy during play sessions with you, the best way to do this is with a game of Tug of War. The puppy can satisfy its urge to bite, shake, and drag its "prey" – the tug toy – and have a fun interaction with you at the same time, while your hands and pants legs stay free of those needle-sharp puppy teeth.

However, even during the excitement of a game of Tug your dog must mind its manners and play by the rules:

- Identify one toy that's used for tug games and only bring it out when it's time to play. Otherwise, keep it put away. Don't play tug with the dog's other toys.
- Teach the dog to grab on to the toy only after you offer it and say "Get it!" and to let go when you say "Drop!" Instructions on how to do this are in the handout "Games to Play With Your Dog." Once the dog understands the release word, if they fail to release the toy when you ask the to, the game's over!
- If the dog touches your hands with its teeth in any way, the game's over! Remember that your dog is capable of controlling their mouth and teeth with great precision if you give them a reason to do so.

If your dog follows these rules, they can tug as vigorously as they want, shake the toy, and even growl. This game is great exercise for your dog and fun for both of you.

Another way to allow your dog to satisfy their desire for rough play by finding them some "dog buddies" to expend their energy with. Nothing wears a dog out like play with other dogs, which can make them much easier to live with.

For more information, see the book *Before and After You Get Your Puppy* by Dr. Ian Dunbar. This book is available online, in most bookstores, and in the Sacramento SPCA retail store.

For more information on behavior and training for dogs and cats, please visit our web site at www.sspca.org/pet-carebehavior/.