

DogWise Ireland

Why do puppies play-bite?

As puppies don't have hands they explore the world using their mouths. Play with their mother and littermates has been rough and tumble, using their teeth, so it's not surprising that they see this type of play as perfectly normal when they are interacting with the humans in their new family.

However, in the litter, if one puppy gets too rough the other puppy will usually yelp and stop playing, in this way showing how far to go with the game. They quickly learn that if you play nicely and we will keep playing! Play too rough, the game stops.

Brain games

Play-biting can be down to high energy levels, a more constructive way to use up that energy is through games (see videos) such as Hand Touch, Find It, Twists, Leg Weave etc., all these can be done indoors and will really tire them out.

How can we stop it?

We want to teach the puppy, if you nip me, the attention I am giving you stops immediately. If you are getting down on the floor to play with them, have them on a lead and a toy ready. Encourage the puppy to take the toy, chew on the toy, and only make a fuss of them while that toy is in their mouth.

Keep the fuss and attention fairly calm, long slow strokes over their head, neck and back, maybe even a tummy tickle. If you are waving your hands around and being very excitable the puppy's excitement level will go skyward.

If the puppy starts to nip, take your hands off them, fold your arms and move away from the puppy.

Some puppies will follow at this point and start nipping at trouser legs or ankles, make use of your lead (see text on House Line/Lead) by picking it up and moving the puppy away from you or tether the lead to something secure and move away out of their reach. Remember, don't leave them tethered and unsupervised, you don't want them to get tangled.

Once the puppy has calmed down you can go back over and release them.

Making use of a playpen or crate when you need them out from under your feet and learning to relax can be very helpful.

Using the Hand Touch and It's Your Choice exercises (see videos) will help the puppy to understand that touching your hand with a closed mouth or giving you space gets a reward.

Nipping at Children

Puppies find small children particularly exciting, generally if they start nipping they get a great response – the child squeaks, waves hands around and maybe even runs – just what the puppy is hoping for. Using the House Line/Lead can really help here, if the puppy gets over excited, pick up the lead and move them away, use the tether again if necessary. It is important that if the puppy is tethered, the child walks calmly around the puppy and not running up and down winding the puppy up. Any approach to the puppy should be calm and, if the puppy is calm and does not nip he/she gets attention. If they start nipping again, just turn and walk away.

Try to avoid children hugging and kissing the puppy, some puppies find this a bit too full on, and it means faces are right by their needle sharp teeth.

Rough Play

It's vital early on not to cause confusion for the puppy. You can't be rolling around on the floor one minute with the puppy diving all over you, pulling hair etc., and then expect that he/she doesn't behave in the same way as you walk in the room, walk past them or you sit down to relax.

Instead, teach the puppy that if I sit on the floor with them, they always chew on the toy (see above) and not on you.

If you are patient, reward calm behaviour and remove attention if they are nipping, your puppy will start to learn what is more acceptable to you.

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