

PIRANHA PUPPIES

It's normal for a puppy to use his mouth during play and social interactions, but it's certainly no fun having those sharp teeth embedded in your ankle or arm. It's important to teach your puppy how to use his mouth in an acceptable manner. Strategies for controlling the little piranha include giving him basic training, providing sufficient stimulation to meet his needs, encouraging acceptable behavior, and interrupting undesirable biting behavior.

Play biting is much less common in adult dogs than in puppies, and the reason behind it may be much more serious than a puppy's "natural" biting behavior. Rather than trying to correct the problem through the methods described here, consult with a behavior specialist.

Don't Make Things Worse

Make sure you are not encouraging your puppy's pesky behavior. Don't get the pup all fired up with rough play, teasing, or tug of war. Avoid games that encourage him to attack your hands or feet, and don't wear gloves during play that allow or encourage the puppy to bite. You should also be careful not to reward "mouthy" behavior. If your puppy gets your attention when he places his mouth on you, the behavior will continue. Petting him, picking him up, gently talking to him, or even giving him a mild shove or a light scolding can reinforce the behavior.

Channel That Energy

If your puppy is constantly demanding attention by mouthing or biting excessively or is playing too rough, then he may not be receiving enough exercise and mental stimulation. If that's the case, you'll need to make sure he gets additional periods of vigorous play and exercise and more appropriate outlets for using his mouth. Give your pup plenty of exercise by walking, playing fetch, romping in the yard, or chasing a soccer ball. You, not the puppy, should be the one to initiate these play sessions.

See that your puppy has frequent opportunities for playing with other friendly, young dogs. Provide plenty of interesting, interactive toys, like the ones that are designed to be manipulated to release a treat or those that promote prolonged chewing. The more energy the pup uses for appropriate activities, the less he will use for mouthy biting behavior. Remember the training mantra, "A tired puppy is a good puppy."

You can take advantage of the pup's dinnertime as an extra opportunity for training and exercise. Divide his dinner kibble between you and another family member, and then stand at opposite ends of a wide room or long hall in your home. Take turns calling the puppy to come and sit for a piece of food. In addition to exercising the pet, this game provides social interactions and teaches the puppy to come to people and sit during greetings rather than jump up on them.

Take Control Early

Enroll your pet in puppy socialization and training classes as soon as possible. Then, teach him that you are in control by using obedience commands. Ask him to sit before giving him things he wants or needs, and occasionally command him to stay for a second or two before following you around the home or stairs or going through a doorway. Ignore all pushy behaviors, such as nudging, pawing, or whining for attention.

A dragline can be a helpful tool for managing the pup's biting behavior, and can be particularly useful in the yard. Tie a long line (10 feet indoors and 20 feet or longer outdoors) to your pet's collar so you can quickly grab the line when you need to stop the biting. Be sure that the pet is closely supervised when he is wearing a dragline.

Develop a Soft Touch

You may want to permit soft mouthing and inhibited bites during play. You can even teach soft contact by placing your hand in the pet's mouth when he is very calm and praising him when he mouths softly. Whenever the puppy bites with enough pressure that it is uncomfortable for you, quickly say "Ouch" in a loud voice, immediately stop playing, and walk away from him. Wait about ten seconds, then lead him into another activity (e.g., chewing on toys, fetch, obedience training).

Enough is enough – Using a “Stop” Command

While some mouthing during play is acceptable, it is important that the pet learns to stop on commands. This can be done by giving an “Enough” command when he is biting. Begin your training when the pet is very calm. Hand the puppy a small piece of dry food as you say, “OK” in a relaxed tone. Next, hold another piece of food in front of him, and firmly say “Enough” without raising your voice or yelling. If the puppy doesn’t attempt to make contact with your hand or the food for two seconds, say “OK” and give him the food. If he touches your hand before two seconds pass and before you say “OK,” immediately say “Enough” with sufficient force to make him back away but without frightening him. Be dramatic, lean toward the pup, and make eye contact when you give the instructive reprimand. Gradually increase the time the puppy has to wait. Once he learns to leave the food alone on command, practice the exercise without food by using only your hand. Later, repeat the exercise when the puppy is more keyed up.

The goal is to get to the point where the puppy will not take food or touch your hand once you have said “Enough,” no matter how tasty the treat or how interesting your hand. For this technique to work, the whole family must be very consistent, have precise timing, and practice every day. If necessary, a leash and head halter can also be used to teach the “Enough” command. Whenever the puppy ignores the command to stop biting, a gentle pull on the leash will close the mouth and give you control. Eventually, the puppy will stop biting when you give the command the first time.

Take time to settle down

There will likely be times when your pet is out of control and you have no time to effectively deal with the problem. In those situations, the best solution is to confine him to a safe area until he settles down. Once he has relaxed, release him and encourage him to play in an appropriate manner. Occasionally, providing toys stuffed with food can provide a distraction to keep your pet’s mouth off of you when you don’t have the time or energy to concentrate on controlling his behavior.

What Not to Do

Avoid harsh corrections and physical punishment. Never hit or slap your pet, thump his nose, squeeze his limbs against his teeth, shake him by the scruff of the neck, roll him on his back, or force your fingers into his mouth. This kind of correction is likely to make the biting problem worse, ruin the bond with your pet, and lead to more serious problems, such as fear and aggression. Use the positive training methods described above, and soon your puppy’s “piranha” behavior will disappear.

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