

Nippy and Mouthy Puppy Behavior

When puppies play with each other, they use their mouths. Therefore, puppies usually want to bite or “mouth” hands during play or when being petted. This behavior is rarely aggressive and, therefore, not intended to cause harm. Because puppies are highly motivated to exhibit this type of behavior, attempts to suppress it or stop it are unlikely to be successful unless you give your puppy an alternative behavior. The goals of working with this normal puppy behavior are to redirect your puppy’s desire to put something in his mouth, such as an acceptable chew toy, and to teach him that putting his teeth on skin is not acceptable.

Encourage Acceptable Behavior

Redirect your puppy’s chewing toward acceptable objects by offering him a bone or other type of chew toy whenever he places his mouth on skin and when you pet him. This technique can be especially effective when children want to play with or pet the puppy. As you or the child reach out to scratch him with one hand, offer a bone or toy with the other. This will not only help your puppy learn that people and petting are wonderful, but will also keep his mouth busy while he’s being petted. Alternate which hand does the petting and which one has the chew bone. At first, you may need to pet or scratch your puppy for short periods of time since the longer he’s petted, the more likely he is to get excited and start to nip.

Discourage Unacceptable Behavior

You must also teach your puppy that putting his mouth on skin is unacceptable and that nipping results in all fun time stopping immediately. Teach your puppy that nipping “turns off” all attention and social interaction with you. As soon as you feel his teeth on your skin, yelp “ouch” in a high-pitched voice, then ignore him for a few seconds. If he continues to place his teeth on your skin, leave the room. You may need to have him tethered by a leash while you play, so when you leave, he can’t follow. After 10-15 seconds, return to your puppy and try the chew toy and petting method again. It will take many repetitions for your puppy to understand what’s expected.

Never leave your puppy unattended while he is tethered as he may get tangled in his leash and injure himself. When leaving the room, stand at a good distance from your puppy where you can still see him but he may not be able to see you.

Jumping

When your puppy jumps up on you, he wants attention. When you push him away, knee him in the chest, or step on his toes, he’s getting your attention! This becomes a rewarding behavior and therefore the puppy will continue to jump because even negative attention is attention. From your puppy’s point of view, negative attention is better than no attention at all.

Recommendations

- Fold your arms in front of you, stand still, and ignore the jumping behavior.
- Continue to ignore him until all four of her feet are on the ground, then quietly praise him and give him a treat. If he knows the “sit” command, give him the command when all four feet are on the ground, then quietly praise him and give him a treat while he’s in the sitting position.
- If he jumps up again when you begin to praise him, simply stand up straight, folding your arms, and remain still. Repeat step two, above. Remember to keep your praise low key.
- Try to have every person he meets follow these same steps.

When your puppy realizes that he gets the attention he craves only when he stops jumping on you and sits (if he knows the command), he’ll stop jumping up. Remember, once you’ve taught him to come and sit quietly

for attention, you must reward that behavior. Be careful not to ignore him when he comes and sits politely, waiting for your attention.

What Not to Do

Attempts to tap, slap, or hit your puppy for nipping or jumping up are guaranteed to backfire.

Several things may happen, depending on your puppy's temperament and the severity of the correction:

- He could become "hand shy" and cringe or cower whenever a hand comes toward his face.
- He could become afraid of you and refuse to come to you or approach you at all.
- He could respond in a defensive manner and attempt to bite you to defend himself.
- He could interpret a mild slap as an invitation to play, causing him to become more excited and even more likely to nip or jump.

A Note about Children and Puppies

It's very difficult for young children to practice the kind of behavior modification outlined here. Children's first reaction to being nipped, mouthed, or jumped up on by a puppy is to push the puppy away with their hands and arms. This will be interpreted by the puppy as play and will probably cause the puppy to nip, mouth, or jump even more. Puppies should never be left alone with children under 10 years old and parents should monitor closely all interactions between their children and puppies.