

Mouthing, Nipping, Biting

This lesson is about what to do when the sweet, cuddly thing you brought home turns into an aggressive baby alligator. It happens, and all part of the progression of achieving a calm, well-adjusted and obedient alert dog for your child. Before beginning, we need to understand the differences between the three behaviors in the title.

Mouthing. This is just gently taking your extremity (hand, or foot) gently in their mouth. This is a form of communication, meaning they want your attention to be fed, to relieve themselves, for attention, or in our case maybe even to alert. This behavior should not be discouraged.

Nipping. This is actual closure of the teeth on someone/something. It is not intended to be painful, but sometimes it is as the pup has not yet learned what is painful.

Biting. This is aggressive behavior intended to hurt/injure the recipient. This is completely unacceptable behavior, and indicates severe problems not covered in this lesson.

Causes/Reasons for this behavior.

So, what is going on here? It is very natural, and could be one, or mere likely, a combination of the following:

- Dominance testing
- Learning about their environment
- Teething
- Play

Taking them in order, they are not necessarily trying to establish their dominance, but rather just trying to figure which entity that they are involved with deserves to be their Alpha. The good news is that very often, when that is established, they will stop biting the Alpha that they have selected.” Also, they tend to feel things with their mouth/tongue, as opposed to you humans who do it with their hands.

At age 8 weeks, your puppy’s permanent teeth are starting to come in. You with children will relate to this. It can be a painful time for the infant (baby or pup), and they continually seek relief. This usually manifests itself with chewing on physical objects, like rugs, furniture, shoes, etc, but can also be related to chewing on us.

Last, but not least is play! These pups have an abundance of excess energy that must be burned, and the natural outlet is play with their littermates and pack members. In the wild, this happens naturally, but with us, we have suddenly taken them out of this natural environment, and they will seek a substitute

What to do

There are multiple approaches available, which can be used in parallel. I will try to describe them, but you will have to determine what works best for your pup. The key is consistency, persistence and patience on your part. The fix must be accomplished gradually, and cannot be achieved with one dramatic breakthrough. Think what would happen to you, if you were suddenly blindfolded, with your hands tied behind your back. You would be deprived of your primary senses. This is how a pup would feel if they were suddenly deprived of their ability to use their mouths.

Before going into detailed remedies, let me note something that I have learned from Cesar Millar (Dog Whisperer). I disagree with some of his training methods, but the following is fundamental to dog behavior. What drives humans is Heart/Mind/Body, in that order. I.e., we respond first to affection, next to discipline and finally to our bodily needs. Dogs are exactly opposite, in that they first are motivated by bodily needs, secondly to discipline, but last by affection.

So that leads us to some of the techniques we can employ.

1. Exercise. Many times the nipping problem is just that the pup is burning off excess energy. As a general rule, the first activity when awakening in the morning, or from a nap should be physical exercise. This could be a walk, tossing a ball or toy, or just letting them run off their energy in the back yard. Next should be some discipline, like practicing some commands. Finally, you can start the affectionate part, where the nipping should first occur.
2. The most effective fix for this problem is unfortunately not generally available to us. That is leaving them to grow up with their pack. Through interactions with their litter mates, their mother, and other pack members, they will learn what level of mouthing is acceptable, as the recipient will let them know, in no uncertain terms, when limits are exceeded. New puppy raisers should take any advantage of supervised play with other dogs of similar age, or even with well-tempered older dogs, for brief periods. But be careful, as very rough play can injure the pup.
3. So the above leads us to an attempt to duplicate what would happen in the wild, where the offended individual would emit a sharp yip and cease the play. You can do the same, but it must be loud and sincere sounding. Let the pup continue his nipping until it really hurts, then make the loud sound. Do not withdraw your hand as that just indicates a chase after it again. Rather let it go limp for a few seconds. Let play resume until the bite exceeds the threshold, then repeat the process. They learn by repetition, so this should be repeated 3 or 4 time in a session. You will gradually lower the pain threshold that caused you to yip. This is called "bite inhibition". Then proceed to one of the following procedures.
4. Substitution. Immediately following the above, give them something acceptable to chew on, and praise them if they take it. Doesn't always work, but worth a try. Sometimes, a treat will work, but be careful here, so they don't think the treat is a reward for their nipping. I.e., only give a treat if your yipping stops them for a few seconds, then give the treat to keep them from starting again. If you suspect that teething is involved, you can

give small chips of ice as a substitute, as it is soothing to their gums. Do not give large pieces, as it can break teeth.

5. Isolation. When nipped, try just turning your back on the pup for 10 seconds, or so. If they continue nipping at your heels, leave them to where they can't get at you. Alternately, just pop them in their kennel for a while. Ultimately, they will get the message that you do not like what they are doing, and it defeats their purpose.
6. Do not slap, hit or push them away. They just interpret this as invitation for more play. You can remove them from whatever they are nibbling on (including you) by grabbing them by the scruff of the neck and, saying "don't".
7. Weapons. The pup needs to get a clear message that their behavior is unacceptable. Following are some tools that you may find useful:
 - Squirt bottle or water pistol. Just give them a squirt in the face when they are nipping unacceptably.
 - Loud noise. Put some rocks in a tin can, and shake it vigorously if they are nipping. Some dogs don't like this noise
 - Taste deterrent. Put Grannick Green Apple solution on your hand, or other area they like to nip at. It has a harmless, but unpleasant taste.
8. Do not play tug games with the pup. That just tells them that nipping is OK. Also do not play chase games as running away prompts them to chase you and bite at you.
9. Dominance procedure. For the first several critical bonding months, this should be done only by the child because it is a strong bonding procedure! Put the dog on its side. From behind the dog hold it down with one hand holding its mouth closed and on the floor. Continue until the dog becomes quiet, and then let it up with praise.
10. Set them up. This can be combined with most of the above techniques. Put the dog on leash being held by the child. Another person then tries to induce mouthing, or nipping, and they tell the child when it is too hard, The child then jerks the pup away, saying "don't" loudly. Also have another child run around just out of reach of the dog, If the dog tries to chase, again give the jerk, and "don't" command.
11. Humping. I include this here, because it is related, and many of the above techniques are applicable for controlling it. It is NOT a sexual behavior, but rather a dominance maneuver. Remove them by grabbing them by the scruff of the neck, as the mother dog would do. You can pinch them slightly, but do not shake them!

This should give you some tools to work with. However, do not despair, as you have one thing working for you that is most effective. That is time! Most pups do eventually grow out of this. The nipping and chewing thing is irritating, but you will survive. The biggest danger is that this will turn off your child, and interfere with the bonding. So, be sure to explain all of this to your child and involve them in the correction procedures, so that they can sense the progress that is being made.