

BRINGING UP PUPPY - PART 3

It's hard to believe that my pup, Stoney, is now 4 months old. Time passes so very quickly! Stoney continues to add much sunshine to our household, but I cannot say I am sorry that he is teething and those razor sharp puppy teeth will soon be a distant memory.

From the day I bring a new puppy home, I start teaching the pup that **TEETH SHOULD NEVER TOUCH SKIN!** The teaching is geared towards the age and understanding of the individual puppy. Patience and CONSISTENCY are essential for success.

Often first time puppy owners do not understand why a puppy mouths and nips. However, in the wild strong jaw muscles and teeth are necessary for survival. Puppies also explore much of their world and learn about their environment with their mouths. Initial bite inhibition is learned in the litter from the mother and while playing with littermates. When one pup bites too hard on another, the victim may yelp or growl, letting the offender know that those sharp teeth have caused pain. Often times a mother dog will place her mouth around the head of a pup who persists in nipping, indicating the need to be gentle. When a pup doesn't have other dogs to help them learn and understand this bite inhibition, then we as owners must take on this task.

How effective you are in teaching your pup bite inhibition depends in part on the relationship you develop with him. Teaching your puppy that he can trust you and must *respect* you is an essential foundation. The pup does not understand why he can nip now, but that same behavior is unacceptable in five minutes when he chomps harder and causes discomfort. That is why I follow the rule that teeth must never touch the skin.

Most articles you read on the subject of mouthing in puppies suggest that you yelp with an "OW!" or similar noise when the pup bites too hard. The reasoning is that "OW!" is similar to the correction pups give to each other in the litter. Granted, the pup will be startled by the noise you make and may well release your hand, foot or arm. However, in my mind, it takes many repetitions for the pup to figure out that you make the noise when he bites too hard. In the meantime, you become the object for testing and end up being his pin cushion. I much prefer to teach my pups that their teeth should never touch my skin. This means that each and every time my pup does place his teeth on my skin, he is given a verbal "warning". It does not matter if his teeth touch me with only slight force. Every time those teeth touch my skin, I give him a warning. (If the warning is not heeded, a correction is given. Such corrections will be discussed shortly)

I do believe that dogs develop a basic vocabulary, and therefore I say "No Bite" placing a name to the command/warning. The single word "NO" is avoided, because like children, I think puppies can just learn to tune you out if you use the reprimand "NO" time and time again. (The pup must figure out what he has done to displease you.) So, my simple mind finds it easiest to just tell the puppy exactly what I want. Using a command such as "No Bite" also helps me stay calm, yet firmly explain what I want. Yelling at the puppy does not teach him anything, except possibly to fear you.

Becoming physical is not the answer to stop mouthing/nipping/biting. Slapping at the pup, forcibly holding his mouth closed, pushing down on his tongue, etc. may cause your pup to feel resentful or fearful. In some, such corrections may also be seen as a type of rough play and may actually accelerate the mouthing.

When the pup first comes home and is very young, I will say "No Bite" when his teeth touch my skin and then distract the pup with a toy. As the pup matures a bit and decides my hand or arm is more inviting than that toy, then I will gently grasp one side of the scruff of his neck (you can grasp the collar if you keep one on your pup), **LOOK THE PUP IN THE EYE**, and tell him "No Bite" in a firm voice. If necessary for a more determined pup, I may also give him a little shake as I grasp the neck or collar. (Looking the pup in the eye helps establish you as the alpha and also tells the pup that you mean what you say.) If you are consistent and work on this every single time those teeth touch your skin, I find that my pups learn early on to back those teeth off when I issue the command. Usually by 3 months of age, my pups will cease any attempt at biting with just the verbal command.

That being said, I think there are two important points we should all remember. First, during the mouthing stages it is important that you provide appropriate items for the pup to chew. The pressure of chewing helps relieve discomfort in those gums. A kong toy filled with peanut butter or other goodies, a bully stick or rawhide, frozen carrots, etc. are some examples of things you can use to provide chewing activity. I do not leave chew items down on the floor for the pup to have all the time. Rather, I will provide them at intervals during the day. This