

OUCH! My puppy keeps biting me and it HURTS!

Part 1 — WHY Your Puppy Is Biting You



So you have an adorable new puppy, sweet, cuddly until..... "OUCH! HEY! My puppy just BIT me!!!" You may be surprised to know that this is perfectly normal puppy behavior, driven by primitive instincts to get feedback on their mouths. They may jump at you, they try to entice you to play and they seek attention by biting at your hands, your clothes, your shoes.

Where it all started: Wolves must hunt and kill their food and they have the perfect weapon for that, their teeth. However, they live in a social environment with other wolves and they must be able to safely resolve conflicts over food, mates, and resources in spite of their teeth. Since they do not have lawyers, police or owners to resolve their disputes, they must rely on responsible use of their "weapons" to settle things. These weapons, or tools, include lip lifts, snarls, growls, and, yes, those big pointy teeth. They must learn to use these tools safely so they don't end up killing off their own species over a dispute for a bone. But how do they learn to control that mouth and those teeth? Baby wolves, like our domestic puppy dogs, have sharp baby teeth. The baby wolves play fight and play bite. If one bites the other too hard, "YIPE!" and play stops momentarily or playmate might run off briefly. Baby wolf learns not to bite so hard next time so the play doesn't stop or playmate doesn't run off. Even more importantly, and without being conscious of it, they are learning how to control the pressure of their bite. The ability to inhibit the force of their bite must be learned before their adult teeth come in. When they become adults, they will then have a safe tool with which to resolve their conflicts.

Sharp baby teeth in your puppy's mouth serve a very important purpose. By appropriate mouth interactions, and with feedback from other pups and humans, the pup acquires the ability to control how soft or hard they are biting. This is known as **Bite Inhibition**. You want your puppy to have the greatest bite inhibition possible. Baby teeth are only in the mouth for a short time, and start falling out about 18 weeks of age, depending on the breed. Puppy bites are painful, but really only do superficial damage. Pups can get lots of feedback on how hard they are biting without doing serious harm. Once adult teeth come in, they have missed that opportunity to learn bite inhibition. That is why it is so important that they learn acceptable "bite inhibition" early. Later in life, if your dog is startled by something and bites, good bite inhibition determines whether your dog will growl, snap, and/or just apply teeth *OR* whether he will puncture, maim or kill another being.

We have selectively bred our domestic dogs to look different and act different. They even have a much looser social structure. Most no longer have to hunt for food (although they are usually on the lookout for food anyway). But they still have those lovely teeth. *It is critical that you allow your pup to learn how to use them and to teach your puppy how to apply those teeth gently to humans before the baby teeth fall out and the adult teeth come in.*



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Part 2 — Teaching Your Puppy Mouth Manners

It is critically important that you teach your pup **HOW** to bite, rather than **NOT** to bite. Later in life, if your dog is startled by something and bites, good bite inhibition determines whether your dog will simply growl, snap, and/or just apply teeth as a warning, *OR* whether he will puncture, maim or kill another being. A dog with great bite inhibition is a much safer dog!

What NOT to do: Slapping, pressing their lip onto their teeth, squeezing the muzzle, and other assorted onslaughts should never be done. Your puppy has a couple of ways to view this: as an invitation to continue to play and mouth you even harder, or, worse, as a very scary and threatening action that you are directing at him. Your hand coming toward his muzzle would predict bad things (pain) and he will likely become defensive and eventually he may lose patience and snap or bite you to defend himself. Quite the opposite of your desired goal!

How to teach your pup to apply teeth softly to humans: Hold puppy on your lap. Allow your fingers in his mouth as long as he is mouthing softly. Praise him softly as he softly mouths your hand. The first hard bite you feel, you scream "OW!" Be sure to say it **LOUDLY**. It should startle him and cause him to stop biting or to lick your hand in an appeasement gesture. If he does so, praise him softly and allow him to mouth you softly once again. If, instead or backing off, your pup bites harder, say "TOO BAD!" and give him a "time out." A time out is basically taking **YOU** and your attention away from your dog. Either put him down and abruptly walk away, ignoring him for about 30 seconds or place him in his ex-pen (no looking at his face or talking to him while you do this). Remember this is a training session, so do it without anger and don't wait until it really hurts. Be consistent. Sessions should be short, five minutes or so, and done a few times day. Each week the bites on your hand should become progressively softer. Even when they no longer hurt, you will *still* say "OW!" You want your puppy to think that humans are quite a fragile species and that they must be extremely careful with you, barely a whisper of teeth on your skin. Uninvited bites are usually a bid to get you to play, stemming from a hard-wired drive to learn about their bite inhibition (see Part 1). However, they are inappropriate. *Uninvited bites on you or your clothing should earn your pup an instant time out, every time.* Finally, about the time the puppy teeth start to be replaced with adult teeth (approximately 18 weeks), you should have instilled a pretty soft bite in your puppy.

Best assistance you can get with this: Play fighting and biting other puppies in the same age and "teeth" group. The other puppies scream when bitten too hard and stop playing with the puppy doing the hard biting. The hard-biting puppy then learns if he wants to play, he must bite softer. This can be accomplished by taking your puppy-to-puppy socials and puppy classes, which provide excellent opportunities for your puppy to learn this important life lesson.



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