

SOUTH COAST VET CARE ~ ANIMAL MATTERS

HELP MY PUPPY BITES!!!

If you have a new puppy in your household, then the chances are you have been the victim of puppy play-biting. This is something that most people accept as being a natural part of puppy behaviour, and it is natural – however you must teach your puppy that is is not acceptable!

Why isn't play biting acceptable?

As a puppy (lets call him Deefer) has very sharp teeth but only a weak jaw This means that his puppy bite may be a little uncomfortable but normally cant do any real damage.

As an adult dog however, Deefer has larger teeth and a relatively powerful jaw. Other dos may tolerate Deeer's play bites because doggy skin is generally tougher than human skin, so dogs aren't injured as easily. However if Deefer bites human skin he can do a lot of damage – even if he is 'only playing'. This is why it is essential that Deefer learns not to bite while still a puppy.

Why does Deefer play bite?

Deefer and his litter mates grow quickly after they are born. They soon move around and come into contact with each other. As they grow older they begin to mouth and bite at each other.

They spend a lot of time play biting and grabbing each other with their mouths – this is all practice in survival skills. They have to learn how to use their mouths appropriately as this is their only real means of grasping anything.

The puppies also learn not to bite their litter mates too hard. If you watch them playing you will see that if Deefer bites another pup too hard, the pup on the receiving end of the bite will let out a yelp and stop playing with Deefer. This teaches Deefer that if he wants to continue to play he must be softer with his mouth – we call this bite inhibition.

When Deefer comes home to you as a new puppy he may well want to [play bite and mouth you. This is a natural extension of his play with his litter mates. However he must learn that you will also not accept this behaviour and that he must modify his behaviour to suit you.

What can we do to stop Deefer from biting?

There are a few different methods we can use to teach Deefer to inhibit his bite, lets look at them in detail:

"OUCH' That hurt!! This is the same method as that used by Deefer's litter mates and usually works well for unexpected mouthing or biting. Every time Deefer touches you with his teeth, say 'OUCH' in a high pitched, loud voice. (Loud enough to interrupt the behaviour). You must react the moment you feel his teeth and ensure you speak loudly enough to cause him to withdraw his teeth. You should also withdraw your hand at the same time and ignore Deefer for around 10 seconds. In most cases Deefer will look a little startled and will often lick your hand in an attempt to appear. If he does this you may resume playing, remembering to repeat your performance if he bites again.

Withdraw Attention!! Withdraw attention simply involves withdrawing your attention from Deeper when he mouths or bites. ALL PLAY ENDS THE MOMENT HE PUTS HIS MOUTH ON YOU!! This can be an effective method when combined with 'OUCH'

So if Deeper is biting, turn your back and ignore him for around 5 – 10 seconds to allow him to settle. If Deeper is very persistent you may have to leave the room or go elsewhere for this period so that Deeper gets no attention from you whatsoever.

At the end of this time out session, he should have calmed down and simply resume the activity you were engaged in and repeat if necessary. He will soon learn that if he wants attention from you and with you, which he desperately does, he needs to play nicely.

Other Ideas: Transferring Deeper's attention to a chew toy is another method you can use to teach him not to treat you as his personal chew toy. If for example, he is play biting your hand, offer him a chew toy instead.

If Deeper is very excitable start by only playing quiet games that don't get him into a frenzy and don't encourage him to bite.

Putting a smear of vegemite on one hand can also encourage him not to bite. If he is busily licking vegemite from your hand he's not biting you while you play or brush him or practice playing with his feet.

Why shouldn't I use physical punishment to stop Deeper's biting?

If you have already been using punishment, firstly, ask yourself, "Is it working?" Quite often the answer is a NO!! Some people will tell you to smack Deeper's nose if he bites at you, or to grab his muzzle and hold it shut while you 'growl' at him.

These methods may deter Deeper from biting in the short term but may cause problems in the long run, as Deeper will never be sure whether a hand coming toward him is going to play, or smack!! If he decides that it is going to punish him, he may display aggressive behaviour toward that human to defend himself from what he sees as a threat.

Young children in particular can become unintended victims of this punishment. They tend to wave their hands around more than adults and Deeper may decide they are threatening and react accordingly.

Humans punish with their hands, however Deeper punishes with his teeth ---- and his teeth can cause major damage. Far better for Deeper to learn that humans are friends, not foes!!

SO REMEMBER:

- You **MUST** react **EVERY** time you feel Deeper's teeth.
- You **MUST** interrupt the behaviour – 'OUCH'(loud, sharp voice) withdraw hand, ignore (turn away for 5 – 10 seconds) then resume play ----Repeat each time it happens.
- If it continues, all play ends, instantly, stand up, walk away. Try again later when Deeper is calmer.

YOU SHOULD ALSO:

- **Always supervise Deeper when he is with children or visitors. (Putting a lead on him can help you have more control over the situation and allow you to remove him easily if needed)**
- **Used consistently by all members of the family, these methods should help to improve your pups bite inhibition.**

AND LASTLY, REMEMBER TO REWARD WITH A KIND WORD OR A PAT, WHEN HE IS NOT BITING, THIS IS AFTERALL, EXACTLY WHAT YOU WANT HIM TO DO ---- SO REWARD IT!!!!