



HUMANE SOCIETY OF BROWARD COUNTY

Behavior Modification Handout

Rough Play and Play Biting

Most mouthing and play biting in puppies and juvenile dogs is normal play behavior. Completely eliminating this type of behavior is unrealistic. However modifying it to appropriate levels and redirecting it to appropriate outlets is a very important part of training your companion pet. If left unchecked this behavior can quickly get out of control and that once cute little puppy tugging at your pants leg is now a fifty pound dog playfully biting at anything that moves. Set your ground rules early and ensure everyone in the family is interacting appropriately and playing the right games with your new pet.

Starting Off on the Right Paw / Managing Your Environment

You should always have the right toys to play with your puppy or dog and never use your hands as toys. Redirect your puppy to his toys when he bites at your hands or clothes to play. Have an appropriate chew toy in your hand while the other hand is petting your puppy. If your puppy starts to play bite offer him the toy. Don't forget to praise him when he takes it. Always praise your pet for accepting petting without play biting. Time spent petting may need to be delivered in short intervals as the attention may be exciting for your pet and result in play biting. Training is best in small doses when your dog or puppy is first learning a new behavior. Games and activities with your pet should be kept within acceptable arousal levels. If your dog or puppy becomes overly excited during play, take a break and let him calm down. Rough housing and wrestling with your pet may be great fun but if you are having a problem with play biting or your pet is too rough during play these activities will only make the problem worse. Play should be kept low key and under control.

Correcting Mistakes

Most play biting can be brought under control with redirecting the behavior to appropriate chew toys. There are some cases where the play biting has been left unattended for long enough to become a stubborn habit and adding a time out exercise may be necessary to curb the behavior. When your puppy bites during play in a calm voice say "Ouch"! This should only be loud enough to interrupt play. Then ignore the puppy completely for about one minute then resume play. If the puppy bites again and he probably will, increase the penalty by getting up and walking away for one minute. Time-outs should be for short periods of time, no more than thirty seconds to one minute. Repeat this interaction over and over again and he will get the idea that when he bites, you go away. This communicates negative punishment to the puppy - basically you are removing something good (the play) to decrease the likelihood of the undesired behavior reoccurring (the biting). This approach is what we call a time out. An area set aside for this type of training like a baby gated kitchen or bathroom works best. When a walk away time out is used the puppy should be in a location where he cannot entertain himself

with other things. A time out should be no fun! If you actually have to move the puppy to a time out area this will also work but training may take longer. The behavior has to be addressed the very moment it happens and by the time you pick the puppy up and move him to another location other behaviors have already taken place. Increasing your puppy or dogs exercise in addition to time outs and managing the environment will help to create a better behaved and more enjoyable pet.

Avoiding the Pitfalls

The most common mistake everyone makes in trying to control play biting is joining in on the game. Your dog or puppy is play biting out of excitement and when you use your hands to push him away or swat him on the nose this only intensifies the game. Any physical punishments like hitting or slapping will not only fail to eliminate the undesired behavior but may result in other behavior problems.

- Your puppy may learn to be afraid of you.
- He may become defensive and develop aggressive behaviors.
- He could shy away from physical interactions with you, like not wanting to be petted.
- Fearful behaviors will influence future training and make learning difficult for your pet.