

NIPPING AND MOUTHING BY DOGS

Dr. Nicholas Dodman

NIPPING AND MOUTHING

When puppies play with each other, they use their mouths a lot. When they play with you or when they are petted, they usually want to bite or “mouth,” too. This behavior is not frankly aggressive at this stage – though it may be pre-aggressive.

There are two different life stages in which mouthiness can be an issue – before maturity and after maturity. The pre-maturity variety, all too often not taken seriously, and misguidedly interpreted as puppy play, leads to the adult version.

Bear in mind that it is easier to “nip” the problem in the bud at this stage by training youngsters what is and is not acceptable behavior. Even if the behavior has been permitted to flourish into adult maturity, it is still possible to take corrective measures.

PUPPY MANNERS

When pups are raised by their mothers, there comes a time when mom starts to set limits. Demanding youngsters often want to nurse whenever they feel like it, but a good mom starts to rebuff some of their efforts from the tender age of about 3 weeks. Nipping is also addressed, not just by mom but by the pup’s littermates as well. Too hard a nip might result in a physical admonishment from mother, or the nipped littermate may cry out and stop playing. These natural checks and balances help to develop a puppy’s good manners and eventual understanding of their impact of certain behaviors on others.

When a puppy is raised by a well-meaning human caregiver, however, proper limit setting is sometimes neglected. Some new puppy owners do not realize that nipping is not acceptable behavior and that they should discourage it.

However, a certain amount of puppy mouthing is acceptable, even desirable, in the very early stage of a pup’s life. If a pup doesn’t engage in any oral behaviors toward his minders, he can never be taught when enough is enough. To emphasize this point, consider improper rearing of usually inscrutable chow pups as an example of what can go wrong. As cute as they are, chow puppies are often too serious for their own good, don’t play much, and may be reluctant to interact. If not coaxed out of this indifference, the first time they lay teeth on skin may not be until they’re 18 months old and the message they deliver at this stage is likely to be overkill – sometimes with disastrous results.

Instead, permit and even encourage mouthiness, even nipping – up to a point. But when mouthing becomes annoying, or the pup’s needle teeth start to make an unforgettable impression, it’s time to curtail the behavior. The idea is to teach the pup that humans are soft and ouchy. Let’s suppose your puppy nips you for the first time when it is 4 months of age. Having carefully planned out your course of action, you wait until the next time your pup lays his teeth on you, withdraw your hand rapidly, and loudly exclaim “OUCH.” Your interaction with the pup should then cease for a few minutes, just as would happen if the pup were with his littermates. You are teaching “bite inhibition”

- an essential early lesson for any family dog.

If things turn out as they should, your pup will adore you, respect you, and understand that, even in extreme situations, humans do not need to be punctured in order to send them an intense signal. Having your dog understand this concept should be part of an overall strategy of limit setting and control. Not engaging in such a program with a would-be dominant dog often leads an unwitting owner down a sorry path of avoidance and subservience – a sorry state of affairs, and sometimes a dangerous one, too.

ADULT NIPPING AND MOUTHINESS

Adult dogs that exhibit excess grabby oral behaviors do so because they have not been properly schooled as youngsters. They may nip you or grab people by the arm to indicate their wishes or admonitions. Being nipped and grabbed by your dog against your will is a fairly distressing consequence for an owner. The correct way for an owner to deal with such a problem is to immediately implement a “leadership” program in which the dog must learn that all good things in life come from you – and for a price. One common name for such a program is Nothing in Life is Free.

As for adult nipping, avoid circumstances that can lead to nipping while working on the leadership program. If nipping or grabbing occurs do not shout, try to wave your arms around, or pull away. Instead, “turn to stone” and reward the dog when he lets go and stops nipping. A refinement of this approach to management of the mouthy dog is to arm yourself with a clicker and/or delicious food treats and ignore him when he engages in any rude and rough nipping behavior. The clicker is clicked and the food treat is supplied when his

nipping ceases. Specifically, 3 seconds after a bout of mouthy behavior stops you should click, say "good dog," and offer him a food treat. For more frenetic nippers, a head halter with training lead attached can be employed as negative reinforcement to increase the frequency of the desired behavior – letting go when instructed, e.g. Out!

CONCLUSION

Many people don't realize that attention in any shape or form, positive or negative, may serve as a reward and can reinforce an unwanted behavior. If a dog takes hold of your arm and you start to yell and wave your arms around or push the dog away, you may be perceived as a big squeaky toy that can be animated for amusement when the going gets get slow. If your dog meaningfully grabs your arm with his mouth when you grab him by the collar, and you retreat, the dog's bad behavior is rewarded, ensuring that the behavior will be repeated in the future. The only way to avoid scenarios like this is to set certain limits and to become your dog's unequivocal leader.