



Mouthing, nipping and biting

Many of us have heard awful stories about a young child getting attacked by a family pet. We have also heard of dogs that are sick or hurt and have bitten their owner. These situations leave people angry, confused and sad.

What is the difference between different kinds of dog bites? Can a nippy puppy grow up into a threat for the family? Why do dogs bite?

Dogs mouth, nip and bite for many reasons such as:

- excitement
- pain or illness
- conflict
- fear

Excitement

Dogs, especially young ones, love to play. When they see us playing, they can become very excited by our movements and noises. Dogs playing with other dogs will use their mouths to grab at each other in fun. They may forget that humans cannot play so ruggedly, and people may get bitten if they play too roughly with their dog, or try to separate two dogs that are playing roughly.

If your dog is playing too roughly he could hurt others. Stop your dog and walk away to give him a chance to cool down. Remember to avoid playing with him in ways that get him worked up such as wrestling or repeatedly pushing him away. Always supervise young children when they are around dogs.

Do not use punishment to try and stop this playful aggressiveness as it only tends to make dogs more excited and may make them more likely to grab at you with their mouths. You can teach your dog to play more gently by rewarding him with your voice or treats when he is calm.

Pain or Illness

When a dog is suffering from a painful injury or illness, he may become upset because he does not understand what is happening to him. Touching your dog may make the pain worse, or he may think you are causing the pain and bite you.

If you think your dog is in pain for any reason, call your veterinarian for advice. A dog in pain should be left alone and not handled unless necessary.

Conflict

Certain situations bother dogs. When they feel bothered, anxious, or confused they may try to use their teeth to get themselves out of that situation. Many dogs are particularly worried by situations where they cannot predict what is going to happen next. Punishing a dog in this situation will only make them more anxious and likely to bite in the future.

Contrary to popular belief, dogs are rarely aggressive because they are trying to be at the top of the "pack." They are never aggressive out of spite. If your dog is being aggressive towards people and you can't really understand why, then it is time to consult a professional.

You want your dog to be a stable member of your family, so he may require some special training or attention from a behavior specialist. If you cannot contact one, ask your local veterinarian for advice. Don't make a serious problem worse because of some poor advice from someone who is not an expert.



If you are having this problem with a dog you adopted from the PEI Humane Society, please contact the shelter at 892-1190.

Fear

A dog can bite if he becomes frightened. Loud noises, sudden movements, or being cornered can frighten a dog. Strangers, especially men, or certain objects and situations can all make a dog fearful enough to bite. It is also common for dogs to learn to become fearful of children. For example, a young child left unsupervised with a family pet may want to tug at its ears or pull its tail. The dog may think "This little creature is out to hurt me! I better try and stop it by biting, the only defense I have."

Recognize the signs that the dog is showing you:

- tucked tail
- ears flat back
- crouched body
- lip licking
- head turned to the side

Never leave a young child unattended with a dog, even if it is your family pet.

A dog that is fearful of certain situations or people responds best to positive reward-based training *link to clicker training*

REMEMBER: Almost all cases of aggression in dogs are the outcome of excitement or anxiety. It is completely inappropriate to punish dogs in these cases. Punishment will increase their excitement and anxiety, and will lead to *increased* problems with aggression. There are much more effective ways to deal with the problem and to help your dog to be a great family pet. *Link to punishment*