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## HANDLING AND NIPPING

Puppies bite for many reasons, including expressing discomfort/frustration, in play, and because they are overtired. Puppies also have an inclination toward a “witching hour” at dawn and dusk. We’ll look at each of these scenarios.

### The “Witching Hour”

Many owners find that 7 a.m. and 7 p.m. bring out the worst in their puppies! If you know that a particular time of day prompts crazy biting, do your best to manage/prevent the behaviour and engage your puppy otherwise. This includes using baby gates to manage her movement, taking her for a walk or playing with toys in the yard, giving her a stuffed Kong or more active food-stuffed toy such as a Tricky Treat Ball, or arranging a play-date with a dog who wants to play with her. This is a normal part of puppy development.

### Overtired Puppies

Puppies tend to have a wake/sleep cycle of 60 to 120 minutes. If you notice that your puppy seems to lose her mind after she’s been awake for an hour, the best strategy is to ensure that her needs have been met (bathroom, etc.) and settle her in her crate with a food-stuffed toy such as a Kong. Similar to a toddler who isn’t ready to leave the action, the solution for this is helping your puppy to settle and go to sleep.

### Biting in Play

Toys and access to friendly dogs are two good outlets for nipping in play.

When you can see your puppy is getting revved up and is going to start nipping your hands, immediately get a toy and keep her busy tugging and retrieving it. If her mouth is on a toy, her mouth is not on your hand. As much as you can, keep her busy with a toy before she considers biting you rather than waiting until after she has nipped you.

Having regular contact with friendly and playful dogs will give your puppy a good outlet for appropriate nippy play. Through appropriately monitored play she will learn the life-long lesson of controlling her jaw pressure. This is called “acquired bite inhibition” (ABI) and will come into play later in life if she bites out of stress. A dog who learned good ABI in her formative years will cause less damage than a dog who never learned to control her jaw pressure as a pup.

### What to Do if Your Puppy Nips

Many resources encourage owners to yelp or scream when their puppy nips. Generally this will result in a) scaring the puppy or b) revving the puppy up even further. Neither option is ideal. Owners may instead focus on providing more tangible consequences for nipping: the removal of the puppy’s playmate (you!). The order of events could be as follows:

1. Puppy gets revved up and is offered toys but decides to nip her owner instead.
2. At the exact moment the puppy nips, the owner uses a word such as “oops!” spoken in a neutral (not angry) tone.
3. The owner stands and steps over the baby gate in the doorway so the puppy no longer has access to her playmate. This “timeout” lasts for a short time, one minute or less, and the owner stays within sight to be sure the puppy doesn’t get into trouble.

Leaving the puppy is a better option than crating. To crate the puppy the owner must somehow get the puppy into the crate. Grabbing the puppy may encourage further nipping, since she

was looking to initiate rowdy play in the first place. And if the owner handles the puppy angrily, the puppy may become frightened of being grabbed or picked up.

### Biting to Express Discomfort or Frustration

Biting out of frustration or discomfort is a very different scenario than biting in play because there is a negative emotion driving the behaviour. The puppy is nipping you because she wants you to stop whatever you’re doing, so timeouts or redirection are not effective methods of discouraging the behaviour. Biting of this nature is common when putting on or taking off equipment such as collars or harnesses, being patted or held when the puppy doesn’t want to be patted or held, and restraint such as for husbandry or veterinary procedures.

The solution for nipping out of discomfort lies in classical conditioning. This means you will work to change the underlying emotion that is causing your puppy to nip (see “Handling Exercises”). You should never “alpha roll” or hold your puppy down on the ground in response to biting. This will scare your puppy and cause much bigger issues to arise, the most common being aggression. In addition to countering biting, it’s critical to continuously practise handling exercises to ensure that veterinary, grooming, and husbandry procedures are enjoyable for your dog and easy for you to execute.

### Handling Exercises

Begin handling exercises as soon as you bring your puppy home. Prepare tasty training treats, such as cheese cut into bits no larger than the size of a pea. Touch your puppy and then, with your other hand, offer a treat. Be sure to handle all body parts regularly, including toes, nails, and ears. If your puppy is getting mouthy or irritated, you’ll need to touch more lightly, in a more comfortable area, use tastier treats, or feed the treats more frequently during the exercise. Your puppy has limited ways to tell you that she’s uncomfortable, and it’s your responsibility to ensure that handling is a good experience for her.