



Bite-Proofing Your Puppy

By Joan Orr M.Sc.

Puppies are furry, friendly and programmed for learning. Now is the time to teach your puppy about the things that people, especially kids might do, that dogs do not naturally accept. Things like toddlers pulling his tail, people taking his toys, kids going near his food bowl or kids taking over his special sleeping area.

To prevent biting accidents later in life you can condition your puppy to tolerate and even enjoy any kind of handling. Give him hugs, pull gently on ears and tail, tug gently on his fur all over while at the same time feeding him goodies from your hand, or allowing him to chew on a yummy bone. Pairing with a treat can make even rough handling a positive experience. It is essential to use the goody in this type of conditioning – just doing strange things to the puppy will not necessarily teach him to tolerate this from others. When that toddler runs up and yanks on his tail, the dog is more likely to look at you as if to say “where’s my treat?”, rather than snapping at the annoyance. This touch desensitization should be done monthly throughout the dog’s life.

Dogs do not naturally share, but you can teach your puppy to give up his toys, bones, food and resting place by associating the approach of people with great things. When you first get your puppy, feed him at least some of his food by hand. If he shows any sign of being unhappy with you near his food bowl, then feed all of his food by hand for the first two weeks. This teaches the puppy that hands near his food is good. As he is eating from his bowl walk by and toss something really yummy near the bowl, so that the puppy leaves the bowl to get the treat. This teaches the puppy that it is OK to move away from his bowl when a person approaches. After a few meals, move to tossing treats into his bowl while he is eating and then to putting your hand into the bowl with the treat. This teaches the puppy that people approaching means good things. Do not take the bowl and away and give it back. This teaches the puppy that you are unreliable and he needs to protect his food or eat it really fast!

Practice exchanges with your puppy, where you get him interested in something of equal value to the toy or bone that he is playing with and you give him yours and take away his. Or give him a great treat in exchange for his toy and then give the toy back. Sit with him in his resting place and give him toys and treats. Make sure that every experience the puppy has with people approaching his things or special places come with a great reward and you will have a puppy that is happy to share and is less likely to become defensive later in life.

Joan Orr is the president and co-founder with Teresa Lewin of Doggone Safe, a non-profit dedicated to dog bite prevention through education and dog bite victim support. Please visit www.doggonesafe.com for more tips and articles on dog bite prevention, training and how to read dog body language.