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Play Biting

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Play biting can be a very serious problem. People can really get hurt. And all the dog was doing was playing. So, what's going on here? Why do our dogs hurt us when all either of us want to do is have fun?

Dogs play with their mouths. That's the first thing we need to remember. From your dog's point of view, chomping you on your tricep or giving a few good yanks to your shorts may seem like the perfect way to get the playtime started! And it works sometimes doesn't it? We almost always respond. And the dog really gets into it then! We're in misery and our canine friend is having the time of his life.

Zero Tolerance

So, the first thing that has to change is our response to the bites, nips and tugs. Everything your dog does well or often is a learned behavior. In other words, he's learned that something good happens when he play bites. This can be confusing because many of us have tried scolding or punishing dogs for the bites. Yet they persist. All this means is your dog finds your response reinforcing or the play he's engaging in is so reinforcing that your response simply doesn't count.



Zero tolerance means ending all the fun with no warning every time your dog uses his mouth with humans in play. Every time! If you are playing retrieve and your dog accidentally bites your hand instead of the squeaky toy -- end the game and walk away. If he ambushes you with a bite to your arm -- end the game and leave the room or yard. If he chomps on your sleeve during a walk -- end the game by stepping on the leash so that he's instantly unable to jump and bite (but not pinned to the ground).

Playing rough with a dog who play bites is never okay. This is such an important point. Many dogs who play bite have learned to play rough with another human being. Please instruct everyone who has interaction with your dog not to wrestle with, bat at, tease or otherwise rough house with him.

Training

All roads lead to sit. If you don't teach your dog anything else, teach him to sit and look at you. Think of all the things he's not doing at that moment. A dog sitting and looking at you is certainly not biting you. This is a great skill to have trained if your dog gets wound up and has that look in his eye. "ah-ah. Sit. Oh, good boy!" You may have just avoided a bite.

Regular learning sessions throughout your dog's day are really your best path to success. Teach sit and down. Teach your dog how to control himself with stop, stay and leave it. Praise and treat your dog for walking nicely on a leash. Teach a few tricks. North Coast Dogs can help you with any of these skills in a [class](#) or [in-home](#) training session.

Beware this pitfall. Many of us ask our dogs to sit for a treat after a bite. It looks like a very elegant redirection of behavior doesn't it? But some dogs learn that bite leads to sit which leads to treat. That's called back-chaining. It happens with dogs who bark for attention too!

Real Life

Your dog is always learning. So real life training has to be the name of the game from here on out.

Catch your dog doing something right. This is tricky and it will take some heightened awareness. If your dog used to bite you when you tried petting him, be on the look out for the first time he accepts petting peacefully. Calmly but warmly praise him. If your dog use to pounce and bite whenever you had a tennis ball in your hand, be on the look out for the first time he runs to you and sits nicely. Give him an excited bit of praise and throw that ball! If your dog used to bite and tug your sleeve on walks, be on the look out for some proud confident loose-leash walking. Praise and treat generously. Open your eyes and try to catch your dog doing something right. You never know when it might happen. And you never want to take it for granted.

Set your dog up to do something right. This is where your hard work training comes into play. Adding structure to your dog's life can instill a great deal of calm confidence. It will also teach him manners. Figure out all the things your dog really loves in life: his favorite games, favorite treats, favorite activities. Then recall all the things you like to see your dog do for you in life: sit, down, come, settle. Now barter. Ask your dog to "pay" you with something you like (sit) for something he likes (petting). Make this the rule of life with your dog. If he wants something he has to pay. If he does something well you have to pay. Example: Dog sits - you notice it and offer a treat. Example: Dog wants on the couch to cuddle - you ask him to sit first and then invite him up. Many trainers call this the Nothing in Life is Free approach. And that's true. We and our dogs will and should trade pleasantries all of our lives.

Teach appropriate games

We want to play with our dogs. And our dogs need proper mental and physical exercise. The idea here is to teach them games that work with humans. Retrieve is a great one. It involves running, coming when called, drop it and can even include sit and down. It does not include biting. Of course, not all dogs like to retrieve. Some like to tug. This, too, can involve sit or down, drop it and vigorous pulling for physical exercise. Fly ball and Agility are great doggie sports and we offer classes right here at North Coast Dogs. A tricks class might be a fun option too. Dog Park Classes (play groups) are also good for fun, games and exercise.