

Got Puppy Nipping? Take the Clicker Approach.

By Karen Pryor

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Using the clicker [0] to help eliminate puppy nipping.

All puppies like to play and wrestle and nip each other. When they come to live with people, they want to play in the same way. They don't know that our skin is far more tender than their litter-mate's fur—so sometimes those nips can hurt!

In the litter, mother dogs and litter-mates teach a puppy when he's biting too hard. Mom gets up and leaves; litter-mates yip and stop playing. A puppy that has been taken from the litter too young, or that has no litter-mates, may be particularly nippy because it did not have a chance to learn “bite inhibition” the natural way. Teething may also be a cause of nipping, as the puppy wants something in its mouth to chew on and will grab hold of anything at first.

Management combined with operant conditioning principles is the best line of defense.

- Don't let the puppy play with your hands or clothes. Simply stop the fun, and leave. If biting always stops the fun, biting at hands and clothes will occur less often. Often this is enough to extinguish playful nipping, but probably not enough to extinguish nipping due to teething discomfort.
- Have a safe and comfortable spot where you can leave the puppy when you cannot play with him or watch him; an X pen with his bedding and some toys in it, or an area fenced off with baby gates. Nippy puppies go back to their own space for a while.
- When the puppy grabs you or your clothing, stop moving. The movement seems like play to the dog. The fun is gone if you are still.
- When the puppy grabs a hand or sweater, for example, disengage him gently and provide a suitable replacement—a chew toy—instead. Keep a couple of chewable replacements for your clothes and hands handy in each room where the puppy spends time. Ideas: rawhide, toys, knotted rope, an old sock with a tennis ball in it, empty marrow bone. Rotate the chew toys.
- Give your puppy something permissible to chew on, while you scratch his back and belly. This helps him to learn that some things are OK to chew on. Many puppies have learned in this way to grab a chew toy before they come over to you, as a way of telling you that they know what the rules for safe play are! Reinforce that with the scratching and rubbing they want!

Play "I'm Ok With That"

- Teaching the puppy to use his mouth gently is an important part of training. Doing it the clicker way creates clear communication without punishment [0]. This technique is very simple, and very powerful. You are simply rewarding the puppy for choosing not to nip. When the puppy makes the right choice, he earns his click and reward! You are helping him learn to make good decisions! Please do it carefully to avoid small injuries to yourself. Follow these easy step-by-step instructions for using the clicker to help eliminate puppy nipping.
- Take your closed fist and put it in front of the puppy's face. Click and treat if he doesn't nip—even for a second! Repeat this. If your puppy bumps his soft nose against your fist, that's great. Click this!
- Next, take your closed fist and wave it slowly around in front of the puppy. If your puppy does not try and nip you right away, click and treat. Repeat this several times.
- Raise the criteria [0] for a click by both lengthening the amount of time the puppy can have your fist in front of his nose without nipping, and by altering the distance from his face and the speed of your hand flying around his face.

- Repeat this exercise with a toy or chew bone. Click and treat for calmness and for waiting rather than grabbing at the object. If at any time he tries to nip, stop, put your fist or other object out of sight and start again a little further away. When you have clicked and treated him several times for staying calm, click and give him the object and let him enjoy it. He is learning that you will give him nice things but only if he waits for permission.
- Repeat this at several distances around the puppy's nose and mouth and be sure and do this several times during the day.
- Do the same with your open hand. Do the same with your index finger. Try it with your shoes and your clothing.
- Your puppy can definitely learn not to nip things that are near his face and since this is when most nipping occurs, reinforcing his correct choices is crucial. You should see immediate improvement with this technique, but because he's a puppy, you'll need to repeat it over and over, especially when you have tempting smells on your clothes and hands!

Teach "Open your mouth!"

- Prepare a dozen or more tiny treats—pea-sized bits of cheese or chicken, say. Or, for a very small breed of puppy (and sometimes they have very sharp little teeth) a dab of baby food meat on the end of a chopstick.
- Click and treat the puppy two or three times just for coming to you, so he knows that treats are available. Now offer the puppy something tempting to grab—a toy or a piece of cloth. Click when he grabs it, and hold out the treat. If he lets go to eat the treat, click again. Do not click him if he grabs something you do not want him to grab!
- Repeat this several times, until the puppy quickly drops the object when he hears the click.
- Now start saying "Open" just before you click. Repeat several times. This begins the process of putting "open" on a verbal cue [0].
- Next, say "Open" and pause. Hold the object quietly (do not pull) until the puppy lets go on his own. At the moment the puppy releases the object, click and treat. Do NOT click until the puppy releases! Remember, click as he lets go, and give him a treat. Repeat.
- Repeat this little lesson later in the day or the next day, until he will drop the object eagerly when you say "Open."
- Keep dry treats and clickers handy whenever the puppy is loose in the room. If he grabs a hand or your clothing become still, then say "Open!" If he lets go, be ready to make a great fuss and give him a special treat. Everyone in the family can learn this cue and use it.

Teach "Close your mouth!"

This is a great cue for children to use if they are worried about nipping. When the puppy shows signs of getting nippy, take your hands away and stand up. Watch closely for the moment he closes his mouth. Click, treat! Repeat whenever you get the chance. Start giving the cue, "Close mouth," before take your hands away; then take your hands away; click and treat him when he closes his mouth. Teach the children to do the same. They feel safer when they can say "Close mouth" and the puppy does it; and for the puppy, it's a Clicker Opportunity, not a rebuke!

About the author:

Karen Pryor is the founder and CEO of Karen Pryor Clickertraining [1], and the author of many books including Don't Shoot the Dog [1]. Learn more about Karen Pryor [1] or read Karen's Letters [1] online.