



HUMANE SOCIETY OF BROWARD COUNTY Behavior Modification Handout

Rough Play and Playbiting

Most mouthing and playbiting in puppies and juvenile dogs is normal play behavior. Completely eliminating this type of behavior is unrealistic. However, modifying it to appropriate levels and redirecting it to appropriate outlets is a very important part of training your companion pet. If left unchecked, this behavior can quickly get out of control and that once-cute little puppy tugging at your pant leg now is a 50-pound dog playfully biting at anything that moves. Set your ground rules early and ensure everyone in the family is interacting appropriately and playing the right games with your new pet.

Starting Off on the Right Paw / Managing Your Environment

You should always have the right toys to play with your puppy or dog and never use your hands as toys. Redirect your puppy to his toys when he bites at your hands or clothes to play. Have an appropriate chew toy in your hand while the other hand is petting your puppy. If your puppy starts to playbite, offer him the toy. Don't forget to praise him when he takes it. Always praise your pet for accepting petting without playbiting. Time spent petting may need to be delivered in short intervals, as the attention may be exciting for your pet and result in playbiting. Training is best in small doses when your dog or puppy is first learning a new behavior. Games and activities with your pet should be kept within acceptable arousal levels. If your dog or puppy becomes overly excited during play, take a break and let him calm down. Roughhousing and wrestling with your pet may be great fun, but if you are having a problem with playbiting or your pet is too rough during play, these activities will only make the problem worse. Play should be kept low-key and under control.

Correcting Mistakes

Most playbiting can be brought under control by redirecting the behavior to appropriate chew toys. There are some cases where the playbiting has been left unattended long enough to become a stubborn habit, and adding a time-out exercise may be necessary to curb the behavior. When your puppy bites during play, react how another puppy would by voicing a loud cry or "Yip!" This should be loud enough to interrupt play. Then ignore the puppy completely for about one minute then resume play. If the puppy bites again, and he probably will, increase the penalty by getting up and walking away for one minute. Time-outs should be for short periods of time, no more than 30 seconds to one minute. Repeat this interaction over and over again and he will get the idea that when he bites, you go away. This communicates negative punishment to the puppy – basically you are removing something good (the play) to decrease the likelihood of the undesired behavior reoccurring (the biting). This approach is what we call a time-out. An area set aside for this type of training, like a baby gated kitchen or bathroom, works best. When a walk-away time-out is used, the puppy should be in a location where he cannot entertain himself with other things. A time out should be no fun! If you actually have to move the puppy to a time out area, this will also work. However, training may take longer. The behavior must be addressed the very moment it happens, and by the time you pick the puppy up and move him to another location, other behaviors have already taken place. Increasing your puppy or dog's

exercise, in addition to time-outs and managing the environment, will help to create a better-behaved and more enjoyable pet.

Avoiding the Pitfalls

The most common mistake everyone makes in trying to control playbiting is joining in on the game. Your dog or puppy is playbiting out of excitement, and when you use your hands to push him away or swat him on the nose, this only intensifies the game. Any physical punishments like hitting or slapping will not only fail to eliminate the undesired behavior, but may result in other behavior problems:

- Your puppy may learn to be afraid of you.
- He may become defensive and develop aggressive behaviors.
- He could shy away from physical interactions with you, like not wanting to be petted.
- Fearful behaviors will influence future training and make learning difficult for your pet.