

TEMPERAMENT TRAINING or AGGRESSION PREVENTION

By Ian Dunbar

In addition to selectively breeding for disposition, all dogs should be actually trained to be friendly and trustworthy. It would be folly to sit back with the blithe assumption a puppy-dog will necessarily and naturally develop a super disposition, since dogs of all breeds and breeding are capable of being unfriendly. Moreover, the standards and descriptions of breed-specific temperamental qualities of many breeds actually forewarn us their dogs are prone to be shy, timid, nervous, suspicious, reserved, standoffish, protective, dominant or even aggressive, especially towards strangers.

Temperament training is an active process with a number of specific and essential exercises to continually modify the puppy's developing temperament to ensure that it always remains friendly towards all people. A temperament training program comprises three stages; 1. Teaching bite inhibition; 2. Socializing the pup with all sorts of people, so that the dog likes the company and actions of people and would not even want to bite them; and 3. **Friendly training - specifically training the puppydog to 'act' as if it is cute and friendly, so as to assuage people's fears and help people feel at ease around the dog and thus prevent people's fearful actions and mannerisms from unnecessarily spooking the dog.**

BITE INHIBITION

Without a doubt, teaching bite inhibition is the single most important item on the educational agenda of any pup. Consequently, bite inhibition training should head the syllabus of any kindergarten or comprehensive puppy-training program. Teaching bite inhibition is a two-step process: firstly, the pup must be taught to inhibit the force of its biting behavior so that it develops a soft mouth; and then secondly, to inhibit the frequency of its now gentler mouthing, so that the adolescent dog learns to keep its jaws to itself and never mouth any person, or their clothing, (unless requested for some specific reason).

BITE INHIBITION IS ALL IMPORTANT

It is as unrealistic to expect dogs never to be frightened or annoyed by people, anymore than we could expect people never to frighten or annoy each other, or never to argue and squabble amongst themselves. However, just as it is reasonable to expect people to resolve their disagreements without physical violence, it is both realistic and perfectly feasible to teach dogs never to physically harm a person when scared or provoked. Dogs suffer incessant provocation from people, especially from children and men, and a surprisingly large proportion of dogs are involved in some kind of aggressive altercation with humans at some time in their lives. But in such instances, both the prognosis for

rehabilitation and the fate of the dog are almost always dependent on how much damage the dog inflicted, i.e., the dog's level of bite inhibition.

Ideally, all dogs should be taught never to respond aggressively to any kind of provocation, but this is impossible in practice, especially in instances of extreme and unexpected provocation. For examples: Case 1 An eight-year-old struck out and hit the dog's muzzle with a baseball bat. The dog yelped and ran. Case 2 A woman tripped, dropped a cup of hot chocolate over the dog and fell headlong into the dog's face whilst it was gnawing on a bone. The dog nipped the woman on the cheek but did not puncture the skin. Case 3 A woman hurrying to answer the phone pierced the dog's thigh with her high-heel. The dog bit her on the ankle causing three punctures barely one quarter of an inch deep. Case 4 A man grabbed the dog's cheeks with both hands, shook the dog vigorously, flipped it on its back and screamed obscenities in the dog's face. The dog sliced the man's ear with two punctures - little damage but a lot of blood. Case 5 A three-year-old toddled up to the dog and reached out to pat it on the head. The dog bit the child in the face five times.

These were individual case histories, in which the dog was provoked and understandably responded in some way. In each instance, whether the scared and/or provoked dog ran, hid, growled, snarled, snapped, nipped, bit, or savaged depended primarily on the degree of learned bite-inhibition established in puppyhood. Because the dogs exercised remarkable restraint and demonstrated solid bite inhibition, the first four cases were resolved easily with basic, commonsensical people training and dog training. However, in the fifth case, the dog was euthanised and the child was physically and mentally scarred for life. The dog had obviously not been socialized or proofed with children but more damning, the dog had very little bite inhibition at all.

When bite-inhibition is poor or non-existent, if and when the dog bites, in addition to the serious injury caused to the victim, invariably the dog loses its life and the owner loses their companion, their peace of mind and often a lawsuit. However, when good bite inhibition has been firmly established in puppy hood, should the dog be provoked to bite as an adult, it seldom causes appreciable harm and consequently, rehabilitation is comparatively easier and safer. Basically, bite inhibition is the dog's, owner's and victim's last line of defense.

INHIBIT FORCE BEFORE FREQUENCY

A puppy's needle-sharp teeth and its often-rapacious penchant for biting are essential for the establishment of bite inhibition and the development of a soft mouth. Puppy biting hurts but seldom causes appreciable harm. In fact, puppy-biting behavior is the means a young pup learns its jaws can hurt. And it is important puppies learn to inhibit the force of their biting before they acquire the blunt, yet formidable teeth, and strong jaws of an adolescent dog.

Although the abrupt and total curtailment of puppy biting (if possible) offers immediate relief to most owners, it often reflects only a short-term gain, which does not always augur well for the future. If the puppy is forbidden to bite, it will not have sufficient opportunity to learn that its jaws may inflict pain. Thus, if ever provoked to bite as an adult, the resultant bite is likely to be a hard one, causing severe damage. Certainly puppy biting must be controlled but only in a progressive, systematic manner, whereby the pup is taught to inhibit the force of its bites, before puppy biting is forbidden altogether.

TEACHING BITE INHIBITION

To inform the puppy that biting hurts, it is not necessary to hurt, frighten, punish, or even reprimand the pup; a simple "Ouch!" is sufficient. If the pup acknowledges the ouch and desists, praise and resume playing but in a calmer manner. If the puppy ignores the ouch, emphasize "OOOUUCHH!!" and exit pronto. As when playing with their littermates or mum's teats and tail, puppies quickly learn, hard bites lose playmates. Return after one or two minutes time-out and make up by having the puppy come, sit and calm down before resuming play. Once the pup's mouthing no longer hurts, pretend it does. Greet harder munches with a yelp of pseudo-pain. The puppy will begin to get the idea, "Whooahh! These humans are super-sensitive. I'll have to be much more gentle." The force of the puppy's biting will progressively decrease until biting becomes mouthing and eventually, mouthing succumbs to gumming or slobbering.

NEVER allow the puppy to mouth human hair or clothing. Hair and clothing are not innervated and therefore can feel neither pressure nor pain. Allowing a pup to mouth hair, scarves, shoe laces, or gloved hands etc., inadvertently trains the pup to bite harder, extremely close to human flesh!

Once the puppy's mouthing no longer exerts any palpable pressure whatsoever, then and only then, teach the pup to reduce the frequency of its oral proclivities. Teach the meaning of "Off!" by handfeeding kibble (see the SIRIUS Puppy Training video), so the pup may learn very gentle mouthing is OK but it must stop the instant you say "Off!" And of course, allowing mouthing to resume is the best reward for a puppy which stops mouthing on request. At this stage the puppy, or young adolescent dog should never be allowed to initiate mouthing (unless requested to do so). Please refer to our Preventing Aggression booklet for a more detailed description of the essential rules for puppy and adolescent bite inhibition exercises.

Some dogs learn to inhibit the force and frequency of biting quickly and naturally whereas for other dogs, bite inhibition must be actively taught as a specific exercise. After just a few weeks, the 'mouthy' breeds and their puppies from Hell characteristically curtail hard biting fairly quickly, since (i) the owner is immediately aware of the problem and takes appropriate action and (ii) the puppy has more than ample opportunity to learn its biting hurts. **It may seem**

paradoxical but puppies which are mouthing maniacs and/or puppies which grow up with children are much more likely to develop gentle jaws and a soft mouth as an adult. On the other hand, shy, reserved and/or fearful dogs, which often do not play as much and therefore, seldom roughhouse or bite their owners, and breeds which have been bred to have soft mouths, seldom present much of a puppy problem to their owners and therefore do not receive sufficient feedback concerning the power of their jaws. All too often, when a dog has bitten severely, the case history reveals the dog was 'fine' as a puppy: "Oh no he never mouthed at all", or "But she was so gentle when she mouthed as a pup". This is the major reason we go to great pains to encourage shy and standoffish dogs to play in puppy class. The most important survival lesson for a puppy to learn is: when it bites, it causes pain and of course, the pup can only learn this lesson, if it bites and if the bite gives appropriate feedback. Remember, Puppy biting is wonderful.