



FEATURE

# Puppies with 'CROCODILE JAWS'

Words & Images: LE HAMMER



A common problem with new puppies is they like to bite and chew on things. They explore everything with their mouth. Puppies have innate behaviours that kept them alive in the wild. One of those behaviours is play fighting with their litter mates. As an innate behaviour we cannot stop a puppy wanting to chew things. We need to modify the behaviour so it fits in with the human interpretation of being a good puppy.

Humans also "play fight" although we usually call it sport. We play "ritualised aggression" and if we play fair no-one gets hurt. Problems happen if you do not stick to the rules; it may escalate into aggressive behaviour and outside the sports arena it may be known as a pub brawl. Thankfully, most humans learn to redirect aggression into some other form of conflict resolution.

There are good reasons to stop a pup from biting on us, not the least being that it hurts. Secondly, we do not want them rehearsing behaviours similar to aggression. When pups play with each other they can tolerate quite hard bites. But human skin is more delicate. So we need to teach them what they may bite and how hard they can bite.

Pups must be allowed to play their games but we have to set up rules so that no-one gets hurt. We must also maintain a good friendly relationship with our pups / dogs. We want them to trust us and we want them to have a fun life.

There are many ways to modify a puppy's behaviour and it is not my intention to get into an argument about why reward works a lot better than punishment. I will say that punishment is mean to your pup; they will lose trust in you. There are many other good reasons not to use punishment.

So, rather than reprimand your pup for behaviour that we do not like, a more successful method is to simply INTERRUPT-REDIRECT then REWARD an alternative behaviour. The sooner you interrupt the wrong thing, the less the pup gives themselves their own reward (biting is fun).



A little bit of mouthing is OK because this is how a pup learns bite inhibition - just how far he can close his mouth without hurting you. But as soon as the pup starts to use his needle teeth, you need to interrupt him - take your anatomy (whatever he was biting on) and immediately redirect the biting behaviour to a toy he is allowed to chew. It might be a food toy that he can continue to chew; it might be a tug toy so you teach him an alternate game with you that allows him to bite on a toy; or throw a toy for him to retrieve, which is fun for a natural retriever. Reward the pup with a treat when he brings the toy back.

Sometimes the pup just comes back for more. The toy you used may not be as exciting as chasing your ankles or maybe the pup is just overexcited. We need to teach pups to calm themselves down.

Sometimes this "crocodile behaviour" is related to being overtired and super excitable. Young kids often over excite puppies just by the way they run and squeal. There may be a history of the biting game being allowed to continue for too long, or the behaviour has been unintentionally encouraged. For the more dedicated "bitey" puppies we have further tactics to Interrupt-Redirect-Reward.

Firstly, eliminate all of your responses that may have unintentionally encouraged the pup to keep up the biting game. The average owner allows the pup to mouth and bite for too long; the pup becomes more aroused and then the owner is unable to appropriately redirect. New owners also do things like push a pup away, or when pup bites at their feet jump away which, (from the puppy's point of view) just increases the fun. Therefore the biting behaviour increases. When the pup gets razzed up, chasing after the human becomes the best fun ever. Leaving the room just allows the pup to indulge in a chase game. In this situation it is best to remove the pup from the situation rather than remove the human. For a pup in true "crocodile-mode" we interrupt this behaviour by scooping them up and putting them in their quiet place (a crate, pen or perhaps outside) and we give them something fantastic to chew on such as a kong stuffed with great food, a piece of chicken stuffed in a toilet roll, a bone that is safe for a puppy, a dental chew smeared with cheese, vegemite or peanut butter (no artificial sweeteners!!!) The chewing and licking action will help to calm down the puppy, and quite often they fall asleep and have a good snooze too.

Your puppy will always be interested in chewing something - it is natural, so you should always have a toy or appropriate distractions handy. Pre-empt the "snap attack" and redirect before it happens. Give them a toy to attack or redirect the pup by scattering a small amount of food on the ground, which will focus their attention to the ground rather than at your hands.

Remember this biting behaviour often escalates because the pup is overtired. So be sure they get enough sleep. Feed them their meals stuffed in a kong or in a box they have to gnaw on. This helps to satisfy their need to chew. Pups usually learn more appropriate chew behaviour quite quickly and it naturally subsides when the adult teeth come through.

*Image (Opposite page): Peanut butter smeared on a dental chew.*

