

Taming That Tiny Terror (and How the Kids Can Help)

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Hands are not toys - neither are they weapons. This is one of the first things I teach my obedience students when they come to see me, because everyone loves their little Christmas puppy until they realize they have (unintentionally) trained that pup to bite their hands. Of course, it's easier to avoid a nipping problem in the first place than it is to untrain one, but I'm going to teach you how to do just that.

First, hands are not toys. Inevitably, in every family, there is one individual who thinks it's funny to let that 5 pound pup chew on their fingers. (You know you're looking at your spouse right now!) "He's treating me like a pacifier; isn't that sweet?" Well, it may seem sweet right now, but soon your entire family will regret it! When playing with toys, if your pup grabs your skin instead of the toy, drop the toy and walk away. Everyone in the family - including the children - will need to be on board. Soon your pup will learn that when they bite skin, the fun is over! No need to scold or fuss - dogs don't speak English. Just diffuse the situation! Give your pup a break and come back and play later. In fact, in many cases of nipping, I find that pups are far too overstimulated to focus or stop mouthing, usually because they have played too long or had too much activity that afternoon. Make sure pups get breaks. Just like a toddler, they need "naps" too!

One reason puppies think our hands are toys is that we teach them that they are! We play with them using our hands instead of toys (dads - I'm calling you out here!), musing the hair on the top of their heads and petting them in excitable ways. When you pet a pup on his face, you become like one pup mouthing another pup. Have you seen two young puppies play? They mouth one another's faces and they think it's a blast! Proper petting is something all family members need to learn - especially your children! In fact, petting over top is threatening and will often be answered with a nip. Teach your children to pet dogs underneath the chin or on the side of the neck. Have them practice "1,2,3, and see." Pet for three seconds, then stop and see what the dog does. If he leans into you, he probably likes the petting! But if he backs away, stop.

Second, hands are not weapons. If you hit your dog or bop him on the nose when he does something you don't like, he will learn that hands are to be feared. As a result, when you or someone else goes to pet him later, he will growl or nip to keep that person away. This is an especially bad problem if you have children in the home! Never, never hit your dog. That will only make him fear you, which will damage your bond and make your dog less likely to listen to commands in the future. Imagine he slips out of his collar in public and you call him to come. If he is afraid of you, is he likely to come back when you call?

Kids love to help, especially when it comes to the family pet. I encourage parents to look into getting a type of toy called a flirt pole. It's like a giant cat wand - a long stick with a string and a toy on the end - but for dogs. These are ideal for kids to use with dogs, because it allows them to play with a toy with their pup without getting their hands or face near the dog's face. It will also tire Fido out - which will make mom and dad happy! Kids can also help by making sure their shoes, clothes, and toys are picked up at all times. Your pup doesn't know the difference

between your things and his! Just make sure to supervise all interactions - play or otherwise - between your dog and child, so that everyone is safe and happy!

Rebecca Mason is a certified dog trainer and owner of Love Them Train Them LLC in Birmingham. She is a former elementary school teacher and is passionate about working with families to channel their dogs' energy positively. She believes every dog has potential, no matter the age or breed! www.lovethestrainthem.com