

# When Do Puppies Stop Biting and How to Cope with a Teething Golden Puppy

Many golden parents if asked "When do puppies stop biting?" will answer "Not soon enough!" Being bitten by an 8 week old puppy is surprisingly painful. It is also very upsetting.

Puppies start teething at 3-4 months old. With some exceptions, puppy biting will stop by the time your puppy has his full set of grown up teeth at 7 months.

Puppies bite because they are teething, but they also bite in play. So, we'll look at both these issues. Fortunately, you can stop your puppy from biting long before they have cut all their adult teeth. And that is what this guide is about.

## Where did my sweet puppy go?

Everyone knows that goldens are the world's most lovable and loving dogs. So how come your adorable puppy has been replaced by a small, furry crocodile? Let's find out.

## Do all Goldens bite?

Anyone who shares their home with a 10 or 12 week old puppy will tell you that goldens bite! And I can reassure you that this applies to all goldens in the first few months of life.

Fortunately, this is a phase puppies go through and not a permanent character flaw. And most adult goldens are indeed very good-natured dogs.

Before I set about showing you how to transform your golden puppy from crocodile to cuddly friend again, we'll have a little look at what makes your puppy so bitey. At what is normal, and what is not.

## My puppy bites a lot

Worried new puppy parents will often say "but I don't think this is normal puppy biting, he is biting such a lot, and mainly biting the children." And it certainly is worrying when your children's tears after playing with the puppy, are not the tears of joy you had anticipated.

When your new puppy is in full 'biting mode' and pursuing your terrified three year old around the kitchen, you can be forgiven for wondering if you have made a terrible mistake in bringing him into your lives at all. Let's take a closer look

## My puppy is biting my children!

If your children are in tears at being bitten every time they try to play with and cuddle their new friend, you may be wondering if your puppy is becoming aggressive. You may even worry that your children might be at risk.

Fortunately, I can reassure you that this is not the case. While your puppy may frighten your children with his sharp teeth and growling. The way he is behaving now does not mean he will be a threat to their safety in the future.

Happily, studies have shown that behavior in small puppies is not predictive of the way that they will behave as adults! The way some small puppies bite and frighten children even more than they do adults has everything to do with the way children behave around puppies and nothing whatever to do with the character of your puppy

### **Why do puppies bite children?**

Some breeders will not sell puppies to homes where there are small children. This is because puppies often bite children and teenagers harder and more persistently than they bite grown-ups.

It is normal for puppies to make small children cry, but before you rush your puppy off to the local shelter, bear with me a moment, because I can help with that.

Children give off conflicting signals to the puppy. And because puppies are poor at interpreting children's movements and vocalisations they respond inappropriately. Fortunately, there are lots of ways to make it easier on yourself and on your kids. We'll have a look at those in a moment.

But in short, you need to be a little patient at this point, and it helps to know that this phase does pass quite quickly. And that it is completely normal for all puppies to bite a lot, and to bite children with particular enthusiasm.

### **Why do Golden puppies bite so much?**

It has to be said, goldens are even more bitey than some other breeds of dog during this stage in their development. In fact, retrievers generally tend to be very bitey as puppies.

We have bred these dogs for generations to be a little obsessed about putting things in their mouths, so maybe it isn't so surprising that they are very mouthy when they are still small and very playful.

The constant biting can still come as a shock though, to anyone who thought that they had adopted a 'gentle' breed. As can the pain of being bitten. "These are not 'nips'!" say many new puppy parents "they are real 'bites'!"

### **My puppy bites so hard!**

"But wait a minute" you cry "I am actually being injured by my puppy, surely that isn't normal?" The answer I'm afraid is, yes, it is. Puppy bites do hurt. And sometimes they leave marks.

Pain, bruising, scratching, little tooth marks on your toddler, these are all part and parcel of raising a puppy. Some very enthusiastic puppies will even draw blood on occasions. All this is normal, but I will explain what you can do about it.

“Alright” you say, “so the biting is normal, and the pain is normal, but the noise, the snarling, – that’s not normal – right?” Let’s find out.

## Is my puppy aggressive?

Perhaps the most serious concern that new puppy parents have, is the fear that their puppy is becoming aggressive. We may have lived alongside dogs for thousands of years, but that doesn’t alter the fact that these are powerful predators with jaws capable of doing great harm.

It is only natural for an inexperienced puppy owner to worry that their puppy’s behavior might be a sign of a dangerous animal in their midst. The thing most likely to make people think their puppy is aggressive isn’t the constant biting, or how hard their puppy bites, or even how much it hurt. What really worries people is the snarling.

## My puppy is growling at me

When puppies play, they practice being fierce. They throw themselves into the whole play acting thing with huge enthusiasm. And they are brilliant at it. Your puppy’s aim is to make himself sound hugely fierce and scary. It’s all part of the game. And the most important part of that game is to make as much noise as possible and to sound as angry as possible.

So, all puppies growl or snarl ferociously when they play, while they are biting, and sometimes when they are trying to entice their poor owners into yet another game.

Your pup won’t just sound fierce, he’ll look fierce too. His little face will be all scrunched up, his lips drawn back, his teeth showing. It’s not surprising your kids have gone right off him!

Your puppy’s mother, and his brothers and sisters all understood this was a game and weren’t bothered by it. So, he has no idea that he is frightening your children or that you are wondering if he is turning into a horrible aggressive and dangerous beast. Please do be reassured, that however fierce your ten week old puppy sounds. It is just a game. He is truly just playing.

## Normal puppy play behavior

So, the hard truth is, all puppies bite. And many puppy bites are quite painful. Some golden puppies bite more than most, and biting a lot, and growling or snarling at the same time is normal. So is biting so hard that it makes your eyes water, and even occasionally breaks the skin.

Puppies bite at hands that go to stroke them, at bare feet, and happily tug away at clothing, all the while trying to sound as fierce as they possibly can. All this is normal. And you, quite naturally, will want to know exactly when it is going to stop!

## When do puppies stop biting?

Even if you do nothing, if you don't play physically with your puppy very much, the biting will naturally begin to decrease at around four to five months of age. This tends to happen without much active 'no-bite' training in families where there are just one or two adults, who are experienced with puppies and don't get puppies excited.

It also happens in working dog families where the dogs may be kennelled or at least are not allowed unsupervised interaction with anyone apart from their trainer or main carer.

A study carried out on Guide Dog puppies in 2001 showed that simply rejecting interaction and refusing to play was enough to stop the puppies biting their adult puppy walkers. But, and it is a big but – in most young families, this is not always what happens.

In many families, especially where the puppy is a novelty, everyone plays with the puppy, and often in quite a physical way. This gets puppies very excited and tends to make biting worse. Inexperienced puppy owners also tend to inadvertently prolong the biting phase by rewarding the puppy with attention when he bites.

## Things that make biting worse

To summarise, these are the three things that make biting worse in most golden puppies:

- Excitement
- Attention
- Poor bite inhibition

Let's take each of these in turn.

Puppies bite more if they are excited. The more excited they get, the harder they bite. Rough physical play gets puppies excited, rubbing puppies' tummies, chasing puppies, grabbing at puppies. All these things get puppies bubbling with excitement

Noisy behaviour can get puppies excited too, so children squealing, or crying, grown ups shouting or getting cross. All these things can send little puppies into a kind of 'meltdown'

### **Rewarding puppies with attention**

Rewarding puppies for biting also makes puppies bite more and prolongs the biting phase. You might not think you are rewarding your puppy for biting, but you probably are. And you are probably rewarding him with 'attention'

Puppies love attention. Golden puppies are particularly social and love attention more than most puppies do. Any kind of contact with you, or other members of

the family, including physical contact, talking, shouting, even eye contact, all reward your puppy. And if you give him these things while he is biting, this will reinforce the biting behaviour and he will bite more in the future

### **Poor bite inhibition**

What makes the bites hurt more, is poor bite inhibition. So, the next section explains what bite inhibition is and how you can help your puppy improve his.

### **What is bite inhibition?**

At just eight weeks old, golden puppies are actually capable of crushing bones the thickness of your little finger, with their jaws. But your puppy doesn't break your fingers when he bites you! He probably doesn't even break the skin. This is down to a process called 'bite inhibition'.

Your puppy has been learning to inhibit his bite since he was tiny. It's the equivalent of 'pulling his punches'. His mother and brothers and sisters all helped to teach him how hard he can bite without hurting them.

### **Fur versus skin**

Unfortunately, you don't have a nice fur coat, so the level of force your puppy could use on his mother, is too painful for delicate human skin. But he doesn't know that yet. This is where your training will come in. You'll be teaching him how much force is acceptable.

So, why don't we just teach him not to bite at all from the get go? Well, you can do this, but a number of experts think that staged bite inhibition training is very important in order to make sure that your puppy has complete control over the amount of force he applies at any time in the future.

### **What about teething**

We mentioned teething earlier because people tend to associate biting with teething. So, is it true that puppies bite so much because they are teething? And how long will teething go on for?

In fact, most problem puppy biting is simply play. Puppies may chew or mouth at fingers to help relieve the discomfort of teething, but this is not the major cause of the biting problems we find in homes with small puppies. And it certainly isn't the cause of the snarling and tugging that accompanies play biting. That's just puppies having fun.

Most puppies have their adult teeth by the time they are 7 months old, but biting does not usually last that long.

### **Biting at 9 weeks or 10 weeks**

At this stage your puppy's bite is not quite as powerful as it will be in a week or two, but those teeth are still needle sharp. Don't be lulled into a false sense of security because your puppy is so small. He is growing fast and by 11 or 12 weeks those bites will hurt a lot more. The time to begin taking action is now!

## How to train a puppy not to bite

So, now we have looked at why golden puppies bite, and some of the things that make biting worse, let's look at how to make things better. We'll do this in stages:

1. Separate and supervise
2. Stop making things worse
3. Teach your puppy not to hurt you
4. Train your puppy not to bite
5. Safe play for Golden Retrievers

### Stage One: separate and supervise

The first step in this process is to protect any children you may have, or that visit and play with your puppy. You may well have had a lovely picture in your mind of your sweet puppy and children playing happily together whilst you relax with a glass of wine or mow the lawn.

But for the time being, you need to put this image aside. Children under five are simply not capable of playing with a puppy under four months without getting bitten. So, you need to supervise every interaction between them.

Puppies and children – Do's and don'ts

- Don't let children take your puppy into their bedroom.
- Do put baby gates across doorways, even if you no longer need them for your children. Baby gates allow you to separate children and puppies when you are not free to supervise.
- Do show children how to stroke the puppy gently whilst you hold one end of a rawhide chew and let the puppy gnaw on the other end.
- Do make sure that children don't get the puppy excited or run around squealing whilst he chases them. It will end in tears.

### Playful visitors

It is not just children that play inappropriately with puppies. I have known grown men grapple roughly with a tiny puppy, rolling him around the floor, making growling noises, whilst the puppy gnaws on his knuckles.

It may seem like a bit of fun to him, with his work-roughened hands, but there won't be a happy ending when the puppy tries this game on your toddler.

Again, supervision or separation is the key, and if your visitor won't be calm around your puppy, pop the little one in his crate until your boisterous guest has departed.

## **Saving your sanity and enjoying your puppy**

If you were not expecting this, it can seem like a big deal, but supervision and some separation is essential if you are to keep your sanity, and your children are to dry their tears and carry on enjoying their puppy.

With older children, you need to teach them how to interact with the puppy without getting him overwrought. Golden puppies, like toddlers, are easily over-excited. And when they are over-excited, they start to be silly.

Don't worry, things will improve very quickly as the puppy learns to control his biting.

The next stage is all about making sure you avoid doing all those things we talked about which make biting worse

### **Stage Two: Don't make things worse**

Remember how we talked about excitement and attention?

Your first job at this stage, is to keep your puppy calm. To recognise when he is getting over-excited and 'break up' the game.

Your second job is to stop giving your puppy rewards for biting. Remember, a golden puppy's favourite reward is your attention.

Make sure the puppy gets no reward at all when he bites someone. Especially no attention. The next stage explains how you can do that.

### **Stage Three: teach your puppy not to hurt you**

This is the 'bite inhibition' training we talked about above. The process whereby the puppy learns to use his mouth gently on your skin – and it takes a little while. Bite inhibition is taught in stages. The puppy learns to reduce the power of his bites gradually and is eventually taught not to 'mouth' human skin at all.

Most experts believe it's worth spending time on this. We'll begin by teaching the puppy not to hurt us with his teeth.

#### **What to do when your puppy bites**

If your puppy bites and hurts you, remove your attention immediately. This is where baby gates can be really helpful. If you are playing with your puppy and he bites you, you can step over the gate, thus effectively removing all attention from him.

All of a sudden, his playmate has disappeared.

#### **What about squealing**

You may have heard that a puppy will stop biting if you yelp or squeal. And you can try this, because it does work with some puppies.

But many puppies get even *more* excited by the yelping, and on others it has no effect. The strongest signal you can give your puppy is the loss of your presence and attention.

## **What about punishment?**

Some people try and stop puppies biting by smacking them or shouting at them. There are several problems with this.

Firstly, it tends to only stop the puppy biting the person who did the yelling. So, it won't necessarily stop your puppy biting your children.

Secondly, punishment builds an association between an unpleasant event, and your presence, this can give you problems with teaching things like 'recall' later on.

And in any case, you don't want your puppy to be scared of you, that just isn't a great way to begin your friendship.

Most importantly, punishment through physical or verbal reprimands is now proven to be associated with aggression later in a dog's life. Which is of course the very opposite of what you are trying to achieve! That's why modern behaviorists and veterinary professionals all now recommend that puppies are taught using positive training methods and not force.

## **What if you need to move a biting puppy?**

If you need to move the puppy away rather than stepping away from the puppy you may find he bites at your hands when you go to pick him up or take hold of his collar. Here's what to do if that happens

## **How to stop your puppy biting hands**

Some puppies bite when they are picked up. Others bite when they are stroked or petted. We are fond of wiggling our fingers at puppies, petting them and rubbing our fingers in their fur, not behaviours that dogs really understand. And many puppies see fingers and toes as something to chase and play with.

Hands are a particular target for puppy bites so teach your children to interact with your puppy using toys that he can tug and bite on, rather than playing with him using their bare hands. Instead of using your hand as a toy, or rubbing your puppy's tummy, use a long strong rope tug toy to play with him.

## **Distracting your puppy**

If you want to sit and pet your puppy, or your children do, use treats or hold a chew with one hand so he can gnaw on the end. Once he is calmly involved in eating or chewing, you'll be able to pet him without being nipped

## **Using a houseline**

If your puppy regularly nips at your hands when you go to pick him up when he is getting overexcited, you need a better way of removing him from what he is doing. Have your puppy wear a harness and houseline so that you can pick up



the end of the line and move him to where you want him to go without his grabbing at your hands.

## Stage Four: train your puppy not to bite

This is where we teach the puppy to let us stroke and pet him, or handle him in any way we like, without him putting his mouth around our fingers.

The best way to do this is with a clicker and some dog treats. But you can also use a word like YES instead of the click.

Here's how the training exercise goes:

- You move your hand a little way towards the puppy
- If he doesn't move his mouth towards your hand say YES! And place a treat on the floor in front of him
- Now move your hand a little bit closer to the puppy
- If he doesn't move his mouth towards your hand say YES! And place a treat on the floor in front of him

You see where I am going with this? Don't stuff your hand right in the puppy's face to begin with, set him up to win. Build up slowly so that you can touch him anywhere on his head or body, pick up his paws etc. All without him grabbing or mouthing at you.

### **What do I do if he mouths at me?**

If the puppy grabs at your hand, you got too close. Make smaller hand movements further away from him until he ignores those, then bring the movements gradually closer.

## Stage Five: playing safely

As puppies grow older biting can reappear. Puppies between six and nine months of age, are extremely boisterous, and may start nipping with their teeth during play. At this age, your puppy is more than half grown, and his size and weight are a significant problem if rough play is allowed.

The secret to avoiding and resolving this issue is to change the way you interact with your puppy. And to ensure that children follow your example.

Boisterous and excitable puppies must not be allowed to play rough games with small people. The consequences can be very unpleasant, and it is no coincidence that this is the age at which many young dogs are abandoned or given up to rescue.

The secret to avoiding these kinds of problems is 'safe play'. If you find yourself struggling to resolve boisterous biting in a young dog, it's well worth while spending an hour or two with a professional behaviorist.

They'll be able to see where you are going wrong and give you practical tips to calm your dog and stop the biting once and for all.

## Summary

Biting is a frustrating and sometimes painful stage of puppy development, but however fierce your puppy may sound, and however hard he bites, it really is just playful and normal puppy behaviour.

If this is your first puppy, a good puppy pre-school class using modern force free training methods, will support you through this stage and is a great way to help you avoid other puppy behavior problems too.

Use the five steps above to help your puppy pass through this phase as quickly and comfortably as you can.