



Help! My Puppy's A Land Shark!

I recently received the following email from a prospective client. Since the problem they are experiencing is often typical, I thought I'd share their questions and my response.

Don,

Our veterinarian gave me your name. He wrote to you about our puppy Belle. She will be 12 weeks old next week and is a black lab. Belle has a lot of energy and is biting a lot as well as nipping at our ankles when we walk. We have tried spanking her butt, tapping her nose, and holding her on her back while holding her mouth shut. We continue to say "no biting", but it doesn't seem to help and if anything it is causing her to be more aggressive.

Could you tell me a little about your puppy classes? How long do they run? When would we be able to start? How much do they cost? How do we minimize the bleeding of our ankles until then?

We would appreciate any guidance you could give us. Our veterinarian speaks very highly of you.

Having a puppy biting and nipping at your heels can certainly be very frustrating and it hurts! However, while the behavior you have described is quite unacceptable, it is a behavior we are asked about frequently. Don't feel bad as you are not alone and I promise you, Belle is not really a Land Shark disguised as a Labrador Retriever!

Your responses to Belle's behavior (spanking her butt, tapping her nose and holding her on her back with her mouth shut) were frequently recommended by dog trainers in the past, are predominant in some of the classic dog training books of the 1970's, and unfortunately are too often still recommended by some trainers that have not kept up with the advances in our profession.

Many years ago, in my first dog training class as a student, I found myself in a similar situation as you. The dog trainer felt my puppy Gus had misbehaved so I was told to hold him on his back and clamp his mouth shut. A millisecond later Gus' teeth were buried in the palm of my hand and I was bleeding everywhere. I know now that my aggressive response only caused Gus to become more aggressive. As you have noted, your attempt to physical correct Belle's biting is only causing her biting to escalate, so my first suggestion is – stop what you are doing.

Today, professional dog trainers manage and change a dogs behavior based on the science of learning and the following two precepts; a behavior that is rewarded will be repeated and a behavior that is not rewarded will eventually extinguish. These two laws of learning hold true whether we are training a dog or teaching a person.



Since Belle's nipping behavior is repeated on a regular basis, she must find that behavior to be rewarding. While I am sure that you are not intentionally reinforcing this behavior, it is possible that you are doing so inadvertently.

Unfortunately, unless we can ask Belle why she finds this behavior rewarding, there is no real way that we can know with any certainty what the reward is. However, if we look at typical canine instinctual behaviors we know that dogs are attracted by movement. A swaying pants leg, robe, or dress can appear to be a very stimulating toy, tauntingly inviting any puppy to "latch on." Some breeds have more of a genetic predisposition towards this behavior and it is one we see often in the herding breeds. In my experience the retrievers, especially those from field trial lines, also often can be a bit "over the top" in mouthing and biting behavior.

This instinctually triggered behavior like Belle's biting often starts as a form of play and quickly escalates to an unacceptable level. A puppy may learn that when they grab our ankle they can get us to yelp, just like a squeaky toy, which they find extremely fun. No matter what the initial cause of the behavior, if we then pay attention to the puppy in any manner (look at them, touch them, or speak to them) we may be in effect, rewarding the behavior by paying attention to them and at least from their perspective, participating in the play.

Belle's increased aggression when you physically reprimand her biting may also be perceived as "rough play" and tacit approval from you for her to magnify her response. If she considers your actions to be threatening, her escalation in aggression may be motivated by fear or anger/frustration. Without witnessing this action or having a more detailed description, it is not possible to theorize on her motivation. If your attempt to correct her is causing her to respond in fear or anger, you could very likely create a dog with serious behavioral and fear issues for the future.

The first step in eliminating Belle's biting behavior will be prevention. Examine the circumstances and the environment in which the behavior occurs. You need to consider time-of-day, what you are doing, what Belle is doing immediately before the behavior, Belle's activity level (tired, over-tired, hyper), what is occurring in the environment. Many puppies will behave in the manner you described when they are bored and not getting enough exercise or they are over-stimulated and not getting enough sleep. You are looking for triggers associated with the behavior that you can then prevent by managing Belle and her environment.

If Belle starts nipping at your ankles at the end of the day when she's tired and you want to end a play session, look at alternative ways to end play. A quick trip outside to "do her business" followed by some down time in her crate would be one way that you could manage this behavior.

While prevention is one tool, we also need to ensure that you do not reward the undesirable behavior. This is often the most difficult part because it is our natural instinct to react. Put on



some old worn out jeans and setup a situation where Belle is likely to become a “Land Shark.” Make sure you have some tasty treats in your pockets so you can reward the behavior you like. As Belle grabs at your pants leg, pretend you are a tree and stop. Do not look at, talk to, or touch Belle. The very second she lets go of your pants legs, quietly say “yes” to mark her behavior, and as long as she is not biting, reach down and give her a treat.

If Belle is one of those puppies that likes to chase after you, nipping at your heels, perform the above exercise with Belle on a leash tethered to something secure, like a large piece of furniture. This will prevent her from pursuing you for attention. When she cannot latch onto you to get your attention, she will probably start barking in an attempt to get your attention. Continue to be a tree, totally ignoring her until she stops barking and lunging on the leash. Quietly say “yes” to mark her behavior, and as long as she is not biting, barking or lunging, reach down and give her a treat. Alternatively you can play with her for a bit, just be ready to completely ignore her when the play escalates to the point where it is too rough.

If Belle has an extremely reliable sit behavior, and by “extremely reliable” I mean you are willing to bet at least \$100 that you will ask her to do it once and she will immediately respond, then you could ask her to sit as a means of refocusing her. All we are doing in this case is asking Belle to do something that is mutually exclusive from the behavior you do not like. Now most puppies her age do not have a sit, or any other behavior that reliable. However, it illustrates how training for extremely reliable behaviors can be very useful. That is something we can teach you how to do in our training classes.

Our puppy classes are all taught by Certified Pet Dog Trainers and our class sizes are very small so you get lots of attention. You can find more information on our training program at our web site (greenacreskennel.com) under Training. I hope you will give us a chance to help you with your puppy.

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