

PUPS AND YOUR FEET

In discussing puppy mouths, we have to cover their fascination, obsession with our feet! Hopefully, I have adequately explained why the pups are so drawn to our hands. Much of this same information applies to your feet. Your feet are right at their level and they are “in motion”! I truly believe feet are the greatest toy ever invented for dogs, at least in their estimation. Unfortunately, many owners think the pup is trying to “bite” them. This is not the case at all. They are darting “in and out”, trying to catch this ever elusive toy. The pups have very sharp teeth with that little hook; it is not uncommon for their teeth to actually get hung on a shoe lace, a sock, a shoe, or pants leg. If you are barefoot or have shorts on, your bare skin is at risk. Again, there is no malice when this occurs. *Note: Their natural fascination with feet in motion is even more of an issue with young children who are running through the house or in the yard. I discuss this in detail under the section regarding the pups/dogs and children.*

Now, let’s look at some situations that occur with the dogs when they are attempting to play with our feet. It is fairly common for owners to actually reinforce this behavior in the pups during the initial stages. How many times have you seen someone walk through their house with their pup/dog “attached” to their foot or leg? This allows them to be reinforced and enjoy even more the activity of playing with the foot toy. But, as with so many of the things we do with the dogs, there are times when we do not want this behavior to occur. We are in a hurry and need to move quickly through the house. We have on hose and can get runners. The fabric of our pants or material of the shoes is of a nature we do not want the dog’s mouth or teeth to make contact with. There are times we do not want to risk the pup accidentally tearing the fabric. There are so many examples, but you get the idea. What has happened is the pup/dog is engaging in a behavior you have allowed and interacted with them on other occasions and suddenly it is not what you want. The dogs cannot reason through this process. They cannot determine when something is fair game and when something is off base, especially when they are pups. This is just like the people who say they give the pup/dog their own sock or shoe to play with and then want to know why the pup/dog will NOT leave their other socks and shoes alone.

Occasionally, someone will be sitting in a chair and their pup/dog comes to play; and they will smush around on the pup/dog with their FEET!! Sometimes, they will kick a toy for the pup to chase with their FOOT!! They will let the pup/dog get on their foot and then they raise them up and down. People will play “keep away” with their pup/dog with their feet, the keep away item being the feet or a toy being moved around by the feet. If a pup rolls over on their back next to a person’s foot, they will often use their foot to rub the dog on the belly. I have seen people rub their dog’s back with their foot. Are you starting to get the picture? The owners are eliciting play and interaction from the pup/dog with their feet. Consequently, the feet become an even more significant interaction and/or play item. Then, the person is walking around the house and wants the pup/dog to leave their feet alone. This makes no sense at all and creates a “no win” situation for the pup/dog.

Another situation that occurs with the pups lunging at the foot toy is when a person's foot is in motion it can make significant, albeit inadvertent, contact with the pup's head or body. I have seen pups literally go airborne from this contact or be stunned. There is no doubt a pup can experience pain in this situation. And, there is the very real danger of a physical injury. Believe it or not, some pups have suffered broken rib(s) or broken jaw or other broken bone. Another danger is when the pups are right at your feet like this, you can step on them. This definitely hurts them or can break their paw or leg. Even if your pup is not physically hurt, any of these forms of inadvertent contact can scare them. When the pups/dogs are frightened this often translates to them as the feet being "a threat". This can be the start of a pup/dog developing a fear biting reaction.

In addressing the pup's fascination with our feet which causes them to be constantly underfoot, it is important to also take note of the danger to the people. When pups are underfoot, a person can trip over them. If they are carrying something, they can drop it on their foot or on the pup. When working in the kitchen, the person can be carrying something hot and spill it on themselves or the pup/dog. Some examples I know of include: sprained or broken ankles, sprained or broken wrists or arms, broken legs and hips, cuts, bruises, falling through plate glass window, elbows going through glass, spilling hot liquid or oil on the person and/or the dog, dropping a knife which lands in the person's foot or in the dog, tripping and hitting their head on the corner of a table. Again, the list goes on. Let me also mention that often when people have fallen or tripped, they have landed on the pup/dog and caused severe injury to them as well. In one case, a person tripped and landed on top of a very young and small puppy. The puppy was crushed to death.

There is one other situation I am compelled to address regarding people's reactions to the pups'/dogs' fascination with our feet. Many people try to deal with the situation by kicking out at the pup/dog. I am not talking about the inadvertent contact discussed above. I am talking about kicking out at them to get them away from your feet. I suppose this is a natural reaction of some people, but it is one of the worst things you can do for many reasons. Even if you do not intend to make actual contact, chances are you will and more often than not it will be with more force than you realize. In these situations you can raise the danger of injury to the pup/dog tenfold. Moreover, you can almost be assured your dog will come to see feet as a "threat". And, let me be honest, some people kick out to get a dog away from their feet and fully intend to inflict pain or injury.

Regardless of what the person's motivation or intent is, you have to look at what this propagates with the pup/dog. If you are just kicking out at the pup/dog to get them away from your feet, ostensibly you are just making the feet a more intriguing toy. This action on your part will NOT stop the pup/dog's interest in your feet. It will increase their interest in your feet. A key point here is to realize what happens when you kick out at the pup. The result to them physically and emotionally will either just continue to make your feet an even better toy OR it will make your feet be seen by the pup/dog as a THREAT and this can bring about all sorts of reactions, inclusive of fear biting, fear lunging. If your pup/dog reaches this level of reaction, their perception of "feet" as a threat will not be limited to just your feet, but will likely include all feet. *Note: If your pup/dog suddenly*

develops an adverse reaction to feet and you have done none of the things I have described which could elicit this level of fear and threat response from your dog, I can assure you that someone your pup/dog has contact with has done these things to your pup/dog. I was contacted by a family whose 6 year old dog was suddenly darting out to attack their feet. He would never bite, but dart at their feet and then go back under a table when they walked through a room. As it turned out, the new housekeeper was afraid of dogs and had kicked the dog repeatedly.

Bottom line, with your pup/dog you need to understand what their natural fascination is with “feet” and understand that you must modify their behavior for their sake and for your sake. If you have understood the concept of pattern training your pup/dog to not make contact with your hands, you will use that same understanding in dealing with their “foot fetish”. You will want to use a “startle/stop” mechanism and use your one and a half seconds before they re-engage in the behavior to “divert” their attention and behavior to some other item which is acceptable. For your startle/stop mechanism, the sharp EHHH sound will work. You can also use the “shake can”. (Please access the shake can section.) If you use the shake can, you would need to have it on your person every time your feet go in motion which may not be feasible. I think the sharp EHHH sound is the most effective when correlated to feasibility.

Whatever startle/stop mechanism you use, you will need to have something readily available to divert their attention to. I like having a treat in my pocket or a toy with me at all times during the foot training/behavior modification phase. The need for 100% consistency is another example of why the puppy play pens or secured puppy play areas are crucial for the pup and for your sanity. There will be times you need to do something that would not accommodate the diverting the pup to something else. There are times it is not safe for them to be underfoot. The point is IF you have your pup out with you, you must be able to hold to the behavior modification process 100%. When this is not feasible or there is a safety issue involved, your pup must be in their puppy play pen or secured puppy play area. I have already discussed that there are times you need to not have to watch your pup completely, times you just need a break. However, they will be very distressed if crated while you are home. So, the puppy play pen or secured puppy play is essential in my opinion. When considering the underfoot and foot fascination of the pups, you will see an even greater need for having something set up for your pup and for having taken the time to make them feel comfortable in this area. And of course, this helps the pup learn to play by themselves and entertain themselves.

Will dealing properly, effectively, and safely with your pup’s foot fetish mean more effort on your part? Yes. Will this mean being creative in how you can manage to always have “something” to divert the pup’s attention to? Yes. Will this mean ensuring you have a puppy play area available that works for you and the pup? Yes. As with all aspects of modifying naturally occurring pup/dog behaviors, it is totally your responsibility. You will have to find a way to be consistent so your pup/dog can be patterned to a modified behavior. Remember, you are the one who is asking them to NOT engage in natural and instinctual behaviors. You are the one asking them to live by your rules. You have to find a way to help your pup/dog be successful. Moreover, the results you get will be directly

proportionate to and reflective of your efforts.

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