

BITING

When one child bites another child, everyone is concerned. Parents of both children want to know why it happened and what can be done to prevent this behavior from happening again. Children are upset and caregivers often feel frustrated. What can you do to prevent biting, disarm the situation, and avoid recurrences? First, remember that biting is a natural behavior for very young children - a behavior that is often difficult to control.

Although biting isn't "abnormal" in the sense that 1 out of 10 toddlers and 2 year olds does it (it is a normal (temporary) developmental stage for toddlers and it is not unusual for a child between 1 and 2 to bite), it is a disturbing and potentially harmful behavior that parents and providers must discourage from the very first episode.

Rarely is the biting or the event that triggered it premeditated. Children this age don't think before they act. They act first. They sometimes surprise themselves that they've bitten the other child.

Young children may bite for different reasons, and not all will respond to the same types of intervention. Identifying the kind of biter you're dealing with will help you develop an appropriate discipline technique.

Be ready to intervene immediately, but carefully. Teaching children age appropriate ways to control themselves encourages the development of confidence and self esteem. We can guide children towards self-control and away from biting. The key is understanding - for adults and children alike.

There are many reasons children bite. Explore with parents what the reasons may be. To begin, observe each child as an individual. Take the time to look for patterns in the biter's environment and emotional state at each episode.

- See if there is a specific time when s/he bites.
- Does something trigger this behavior?
- Does s/he bite other children? Adults? Objects? Her/Himself?
- Does the child always bite the same individual?
- Is the biter simply exhausted or hungry?
- What does s/he do after s/he bites?

Try solutions based on the possible reasons.

REASONS CHILDREN BITE:

Young children are very oral, and it is natural for them to use their mouths to explore or to defend. Through imitation, play, and aggression, a child experiments with biting and other behaviors.

Experimental/Oral Exploration biter - an infant or young child may take an experimental bite out of a mother's breast or caregiver's shoulder. They may simply want to touch, smell, and taste other people in order to learn more about their world. Toddlers are at a stage in their development where oral stimulation is a part of learning and play. They naturally put things in their mouths to explore and then bite because it feels good. If they do not have enough things to chew on, or if they are not allowed to chew and bite objects, they might be tempted to bite other children.

Teething (usually begins around 6 months - most grow their first and second set of molars between 12 and 24 months - and is completed by 3 years: although teething can go on well into the formative years, so never rule this out.) - this is one of the most common causes of biting. When first teeth are coming in, the gums may be irritated and sensitive. Teething children will often bite because it feels good/relieves the pain.

Hunger - monitor the child's behavior for a couple of weeks. Does the biting occur first thing in the morning or before lunch? If this is the case, the child may be hungry.

Lack of communication and/or coping skills

Lack of socialization skills

Frustrated biter - some biters lack the skills to cope with situations such as the desire for an adult's attention or another child's toy.

Underdeveloped verbal skills - the child may not know the words to use when wanting something, so instead s/he bites and grabs. While a 5-year-old who does not want to share a favorite toy has the verbal skills to say something like, "This is mine. Leave me alone!" a 2-year-old may not. Instead of express him/herself, the toddler may defend his/her turf with teeth.

Threatened biter - some children, feeling they are endangered, bite in self-defense. They may be overwhelmed by their surroundings and bite as a means of regaining control. Children may become threatened by situations such as newly separated parents, the death of a grandparent, or a parent returning to the workforce.

Power biter - some children experience a strong need for autonomy and control. As soon as they see the response they get from biting, the behavior is strongly reinforced.

Emotions:

Anger

When a child is feeling jealous and insecure because of a younger sibling, s/he may express her/his resentment by biting smaller children.

Children sometimes bite because they are not used to being around other children and feel pressured and threatened.

A child who is constantly criticized and overdisciplined may bite because s/he may have become anxious and high strung.

When young children are overstimulated, they sometimes get excited and bite.

Stress at home or at child care; too many changes. Sudden and repeated biting in nursery school or day care may also be a reflection of changes at home that are disturbing the child - a new sibling, a divorce.....

Attention - Biting may be the child's way of getting more attention from adults. In the child's eyes, being yelled at or punished for biting may be a fair trade for being the focus of attention for a few minutes.

WHAT TO DO ABOUT IT (AT THE TIME IT HAPPENS):

- If a child bites, remain calm and think about what the child experienced just before the incident. Even though the child may not have intended to harm another person, adults must react with disapproval. Respond swiftly - only talking about it afterward is seldom effective with toddlers, since they will not understand what you are talking about. Be very specific so that the toddler knows that you are talking about biting. Immediately tell the child in a sharp, loud voice, "No biting." "No! We can bite apples and sandwiches, but we never bite people." It's fine to startle the child for this type of behavior.
- Attend to the victim first. Treat wound - wash well with soap and warm water even if skin is not broken. Apply cool cloth or ice to reduce bruising and swelling. Suggest that parents contact family doctor. Give the victim some noticeable sympathy.
- Remove biter from area. Put him in "time out" for a few minutes. Use a boring place like an out-of-the-way corner. If teething toddler, provide clean cold washcloth wrung out or safe teething toy.
- Your response to biting should leave no question but that you mean business. Make the rule absolutely clear - that biting is not allowed. Tell biter, "People are not for biting. Biting hurts." "Don't bite. It hurts. We don't bite people."
- Help biter see results of behavior. Show victim's bite marks. (Some people may have the victim express feelings, "You hurt me. Don't bite me.")
- Pay as much attention to the child's feelings as to the behavior - acknowledge the child's emotions and give an alternative behavior. For example, let the child know that you can see that s/he is angry. Show the child something else to do when angry, like beating a toy drum. (Once the child's skill with words improves, the frustration and the need to beat that drum when the child cannot express his/her feelings will decrease.) Teach biter acceptable ways to express frustration or how to use assertive skills (give an alternative they could have used in that specific situation). "When you feel like biting, it's okay to bite the horse, but we never bite people."
- Don't exaggerate the biting. If the punishment for the biter is too harsh, the young biter nurses his/her own hurts rather than concentrating on helping the victim.
- Record the injury - who, when (date, time), where, circumstances surrounding incident (ex: 4 children in block area), results.
- Discuss incident with parents of both children.
- Reassure parents that bites rarely cause viral infections. Make sure the victim's tetanus immunization is up to date.
- Bite wounds may become infected by bacteria. Seek medical attention if redness, swelling, or fever occurs. The child may require antibiotics.

NEVER hit or "bite back" a child for biting. When an adult bites a child that has bitten, children receive the message that biting is okay if you are bigger or stronger. This communicates that violence is an appropriate way to handle emotion. Consequently, the child will be more likely to bite his/her peers, especially the smaller ones. The approach to a child biting should be calm and educational. A child should not experience any reward for biting - not even the "reward" of negative attention.

HOW TO PREVENT BITING INCIDENTS:

Understanding why young children bite can help you deter this aggressive behavior and teach them positive ways to handle their feelings. Try solutions based on the possible reasons.

Be alert to potential problem situations. If the child seems about to bite, pick him/her up and move him/her. Get the child involved in another activity. Try to anticipate difficult situations that may lead to biting and redirect the activity. Try to interrupt behavior at an earlier stage.

Establish a rule: "We never bite people." Give your child a reason for the rule - it hurts.

Suggest a safe alternative behavior. Tell the child that if s/he wants something s/he should come to you and ask for help or point to it. S/he should not bite the person who has it. If your child bites when s/he is angry, tell him/her, "If you are mad, come to me and tell me before you bite anyone."

Experimental/Oral Exploration biter - their muscles are developing, and they need to experiment.

Provide them with a variety of surfaces to play on and a colorful selection of toys to stimulate children during this stage of exploration. Provide alternatives - give children clean, safe (make sure none of them are small enough to choke on) items to chew and bite.

Teething - give the child something appropriate to bite if s/he seems to need to bite or to soothe the gums, such as a rubber teething ring (the kind that is filled with a special gel and stored in the refrigerator), popsicle, frozen bagel, teething biscuits, or a clean, wet cloth cooled (can keep supply in plastic bags in freezer).

You might massage the affected areas - wash your hands thoroughly; then, using your index finger, lightly rub the child's gums.

Encourage a cup instead of a bottle - sucking on a bottle might make a teething toddler's gums hurt even more. Once in a while, offer the child a cup so you are sure s/he is getting enough to drink without pain.

In certain instances, a mild medication may be needed to rub on the gums (to numb them), but check with the parents first (have them talk with their pediatrician).

Hunger - monitor the child's behavior for a couple of weeks. Does the biting occur first thing in the morning or before lunch? If this is the case, the child may be hungry. Discuss with parents a mealtime routine for at home and in care. If parents don't have time to prepare breakfast, suggest they bring the food and you will prepare breakfast.

Frustrated biter - teach them appropriate language to show their feelings to get what they need. Give positive reinforcement when children communicate effectively. Also, watch for signs of rising frustration. Spotting potential conflict may help you intercept a potentially harmful incident. You may say something like, "I see you are feeling really angry. Can I help?"

Simplify the play situation. Don't have the child play with so many or such difficult (for him/her) companions. Don't have him/her play for so long.

Tell the child to **use words** to express needs. Give the proper words to use. Help him/her verbalize feelings to other children.

Try to give as many choices and options as possible. Help him/her to feel that s/he has some control over his/her life. Don't expect him to share or to be able to negotiate taking turns with toys - those skills are beyond most toddlers.

Threatened biter - assure the child that his rights and possessions are safe. S/he may require additional nurturing, particularly if the danger is along the lines of physical violence at home or in the immediate neighborhood. In any case, the bond between child and caregiver should be as warm and reassuring as possible.

Power biter - give the biter choices throughout the day and reinforce positive social behavior (like sharing and saying thanks). If the biter gets attention when s/he is not biting, s/he will not have to resort to aggressive behavior to feel a sense of personal power.

Prevent those situations that cause overstimulation.

Ensure that the child's environment is as stress-free as possible.

Reinforce acceptable behavior. Praise the child for appropriate social behaviors. Let him/her know that you like what s/he is doing.

Don't overreact - your attention can reinforce a child's biting.

Don't let it work for a child by getting her/him what s/he wants.

Be consistent in dealing with biting - usually the best method is to remove the biter from the situation and to clearly let him/her know that it is not okay to hurt others.

A repeating biter, regardless of age and developmental stage, needs to have an intervention plan made by caregivers and parents together. Work with parents of the biter so discipline techniques used at home and in care are consistent with each other. How do parents handle biting at home?

Parents and caregivers must cooperate to prevent children from biting. If children are permitted to demonstrate such behavior at home, there will be no chance of eliminating it at the child care home. Working as a team, providers and parents may identify possible reasons for a child's biting and respond accordingly. While early childhood professionals may be more familiar with positive discipline techniques, parents are experts on their own children's behavior.

From the reactions of others, a child usually learns that biting hurts and is not socially acceptable. Eventually, children learn more acceptable ways to play and to express anger and displeasure.

WHEN TO BE CONCERNED:

When a child is always biting for no good reason.

When a child is also tense and unhappy most of the time.

When a child is 3 or 4, and the biting persists in spite of efforts to discourage it, it may be a sign that there are other problems.

When the biting child is in kindergarten or grade school, it is a matter of much more concern. By then, the child should have developed some skills at handling stress and conflict. Sudden biting among school-age children is often a reflection of another more serious problem at home or school.

If many attempts at behavior management of chronic biter have failed, the child may have to be (at least temporarily) placed in a smaller setting. S/he may not be emotionally ready to handle being in a group of children at this time.

If continued aggression, consult with parents and suggest further evaluation of the child to rule out other factors, such as: physical illness, allergies, hearing loss, family stress (new baby, parent gone a lot, divorce, move).

Work together and remember: there is always more than one solution to a problem.