

Biting and the Young Child

Biting is a common occurrence in young children's behavior. While all persons experience aggressive feelings the young child has not yet learned to control these feelings and often acts upon them in a physical way, such as hitting or biting. The American Academy of Child & Adolescent Psychiatry tells us that biting is the number one reason for children to be asked to leave a childcare center. It is no wonder that parents and caregivers feel frustration at how to handle the biting behavior.

So, why do children bite?

Infants and toddlers learn about the world around them through touch, smell, hearing and tasting. Biting is a common way for them to explore. In addition, children who are teething, sometimes find biting or chewing on something to be a relief from the soreness and swelling of gums. The very young infant and toddler do not understand the difference between exploring an object with teeth and biting a person.

As a child approaches two, other reasons may prompt biting such as:

- A desire to seek attention, even if that attention is negative
- Frustration in being unable to verbally express feelings of anger or wants
- A means of gaining control of a situation such as getting a playmate to give up a toy
- A way to relieve tension in a stressful situation such as a change in or lack of routine, a change in their family such as a move to a new home or a divorce
- A lack of sufficient sleep or being hungry

What can parents or caregivers do about biting?

Adults must observe the child's behavior, then teach and model a better more appropriate way for the child to handle aggressive behavior. Do not wait until third or fourth time the biting occurs. It is much easier to stop the problem while it is small. The following strategies may be used:

- Respond immediately when biting occurs. Say "no" in a calm, firm tone.
- Follow through with an immediate, age-appropriate consequence. For example, a young child of two or three can be told that "Biting is not okay. Biting hurts."
- Even a very young child should be promptly removed from the problem. After the child has calmed down, talk to the older toddler about their behavior and redirect to a more positive activity.
- Practice with the child and model appropriate ways of handling frustrating experiences. For instance use stuffed animals to model an appropriate

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way to get a toy. There are many excellent books which can be read to the child. A young toddler does not yet have an understanding of the concept of sharing. If a particular toy continues to cause problems between two children, it may be better to get two of the item to reduce frustration.

- If the child is old enough, teach the child how to use words to express feelings rather than biting.
- Make certain to praise and encourage good behavior when the child responds appropriately to a potentially negative situation.
- If the biting occurs in a school setting, maintain positive parent-teacher communication. Examine the circumstances which seem to trigger the biting. When and where does the biting occur? Who is involved? What conditions led to the incident? Cooperatively change the routine or mix of children and ages. Discuss and agree upon a plan to respond to the child's behavior.
- While the parent or caregiver may wish to help the child understand how being bitten feels, it is not okay to respond to the biting incident by biting the child. This does not stop the biting and has the opposite effect of teaching the child that aggression is the way to handle problems.

Sometimes biting is a result of stress caused by a family or caregiving change such as a move or divorce that cannot be easily controlled. In this case, it is important to keep the child's daily routines as predictable and normal as possible. Some extra patience and attention from the parents and caregivers is needed.

Biting is a difficult issue for both adults and children, although biting can be a behavior that is found in the normal development of children from one to three. It is important to take a look at the circumstances surrounding incidents of biting and to respond age appropriately. If the behavior persists or escalates, and the above strategies do not seem to help, it may indicate a more serious emotional or behavioral problem and require consulting with a child specialist about the problem.