

General Information on Biting

Biting is a behaviour that particularly worries parents, however many children bite when they are very young it is a natural way of exploring and is quite common among young children. It happens for different reasons with different children and under different circumstances. The first step in learning to control biting is to look at why it may be happening.

Why children bite

Exploration - Infants and toddlers learn by touching, smelling, hearing, and tasting. If you give an infant a toy, one of the first places it goes to is the mouth. Tasting or 'mouthing' things is something that all children do. Children this age do not always understand the difference between gnawing on a toy and biting someone.

Teething - Children begin teething around the ages of four to seven months. Swelling gums can be tender and can cause a great deal of discomfort. Infants sometimes find relief from this discomfort by chewing on something. Sometimes the object they chomp on is a real person. Children this age do not truly understand the difference between chewing on a person or a toy.

Cause and Effect - Around the age of 12 months, infants become interested in finding out what happens when they do something. When they bang a spoon on the table, they discover that it makes a loud sound. When they drop a toy from their crib, they discover that it falls. They may also discover that when they bite someone, they get a loud scream of protest.

Attention - Older toddlers may sometimes bite to get attention. When children are in situations where they are not receiving enough positive attention and daily interaction, they often find a way to make others sit up and take notice. Being ignored is not fun. Biting is a quick way to become the centre of attention - even if it is negative attention.

Imitation - Older toddlers love to imitate others. Watching others and trying to do what they do is a great way to learn things. Sometimes children see others bite and decide to try it out themselves. When an adult bites a child back in punishment, it generally does not stop the biting but teaches the child that biting is okay.

Independence - Toddlers are trying so hard to be independent. 'Mine' and 'Me do it' are favourite words. Learning to do things independently, making choices, and needing control over a situation are part of growing up. Biting is a powerful way to control others. If you want a toy or want a playmate to leave you alone or move out of your way, biting is a quick way to get what you want.

Frustration - Young children experience a lot of frustration. Growing up is a real struggle. Drinking from a cup is great; yet nursing or sucking from a bottle is also wonderful. Sometimes it would be nice to remain a baby. Toddlers don't have good control over their bodies yet. A loving pat sometimes turns into a push. Toddlers cannot talk well. They have trouble asking for things or requesting help. They have not learned yet how to play with others. At times, when they can't find words to express their feelings, they resort to hitting, pushing, or biting. When toddlers are looked after together biting is more likely to occur.

Stress - A child's world can be stressful, too. Lacks of daily routine, interesting things to do, or adult interaction are stressful situations for children. Children also experience stressful events like death, divorce, or a move to a new home. Biting is one way to express feelings and relieve tension.

If a baby bites you it is appropriate to show him that you do not like it and give him something appropriate to bite like a toy or teething ring.

Between the ages of 13 and 30 months the incidence of biting tends to increase and should stop around three years of age.

What you can do

- Work out when the biting happens and what it is communicating.
- Identify trigger points and be extra vigilant at those times.
- Ensure all adults demonstrate a consistent approach to dealing with incidents and that routines and boundaries are clearly understood by the children. Pictures and symbols are a useful visual aid to letting children know what is expected of them and to remind them of the daily routine.
- Teach the child to use alternative acceptable ways to communicate, such as, how to ask for attention, or to have a turn with a toy, or to let another child move to give them more space.
- Ensure that the child does not play with the toy (if biting has been to get a toy) for a short time.

Before a child bites

- As a staff team, consider your setting's approach and write this down so that everyone is clear how to react and what needs to be done if a child bites. Draft a letter to parents explaining that biting is part of normal development and that you have a consistent, planned whole setting approach.
- Play alongside the children to minimize the chance of biting by stopping squabbles early, this is especially important for younger children.
- Play alongside the children to model ways of sharing and communicating.

When a child has bitten

- Make sure there is an adult available to comfort the child who has been bitten whilst another adult deals with the child who has bit.
- Try to react calmly and quietly.
- Show the biter with your voice and facial expression that biting is unacceptable. Get down to their level, look them in the eye, say 'no biting'.
- Avoid lengthy explanations as this may reward the child by giving them extra attention.
- Remove the child from the situation by holding their hand. Do not give them eye contact for a few moments after your initial 'no biting' response.
- Distract the child to an alternative activity and quickly praise them for something good they are doing.
- You may want the child to help wash, bandage, and comfort the victim. Making him a part of the comforting process is a good way to teach nurturing behaviour. This will be best approached when the biter and the bitten child have both had chance to calm down after the incident.
- Teach the child who has bitten other ways of communicating their feelings.
- Directly teach the words related to the biting in practical situations, a word like 'gently' could be taught in play with a teddy by physically showing the child this.
- Praise the child when you see them using these strategies and reward them for doing the right thing such as 'Well done John you are asking for the tractor nicely', use language appropriate for the level of their development.
- Praise other children's positive behaviours in view of the child to show what appropriate behaviour is.
- Model these strategies in your setting with all children.
- Use a behaviour chart or reward system if this is appropriate to the child's age or level of development.

If the child who has bitten becomes emotionally out of control, you may need to move him to a quiet area or move other children away from him in order to give him space until he has calmed down. It may be that the incident has shocked the biter as much as the child who has been bitten. Stay near to the child and when things are under control, talk to him about his behaviour.

Try prevention

If you think that the biting occurs as the result of exploration or teething, you may want to provide the child with a cloth or teething ring to gnaw on.

If a child seems to bite when tired or hungry, you may want to look at your daily routine to be sure that he is getting enough sleep and nourishment.

If the biting occurs when two children are fighting over a toy telephone, you may want to purchase an extra toy telephone. It does not work to make very young children share. Toddlers do not have the skills to negotiate or understand another child's perspective.

If attention seems to be the main reason for biting, try to spend time with the child when he is doing more positive things. Snuggling up and reading a book together or rolling a ball back and forth is much more fun.

If the child is experiencing a stressful family or care giving situation, you will want to make everyday life as supportive and normal as possible. Predictable meals and bedtimes and extra time with a loving adult can help. Often, experiences like rolling, squishing, and pounding play dough or relaxing and splashing in the bath are great ways to relieve tension. In painful situations like divorce, it takes time and patience for healing to occur.

A final note

Biting can be an uncomfortable issue for parents. Parents of a child who is bitten are often outraged and angry. Parents of the biter may feel embarrassed and frustrated. Sharing information about the causes of biting and your plans for controlling the situation can help parents to put things into perspective.

Do not take it out on the child who bites or their parents. They will feel guilty enough – support them.

Produced by: Derby City Early Intervention Team (part of the Specialist Teaching and Psychology Service) Feb 2013.

Biting Guidelines for parents

Do's

- Make eye contact with your child and say a firm 'No'.
- React calmly.
- Do distract your child to another toy or book.
- Do be consistent.
- Praise good behaviour.
- Do remember that biting is only a phase (usually between 12 months – 3 years).
- Do explain to other parents that your child is going through a biting phase – you'll find that they will be more understanding.
- Do encourage your child's speech by use of word games and books. Biting usually occurs because your child is frustrated and cannot communicate their needs and feelings.
- Do stand with your child and apologise to the bitten child.

Don'ts

- Do not smack or shout at your child.
- Do not remove toys or games as a punishment.
- Do not isolate your child by not letting them play with other children. Remove them from activity/play situation for short time (just a minute).
- Do not bite your child back. It teaches that you can bite to get your own way.
- Do not be angry if your child is bitten, try to understand why?
- Do not let your child benefit from biting for example getting the toy that originally was fought over