

Biters - Why they do it and What to do about it

Although biting is not “abnormal” in the sense that one out of ten toddlers and two-year-olds does it, it is a disturbing and potentially harmful behaviour that parents and educators must discourage from the very first episode. If a child bites, remain calm and think about what the child experienced just before the incident. Understanding why young children bite can help you deter this aggressive behaviour and teach them positive ways to handle their feelings.

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

The Experimental Biter

An infant or young child may take an experimental bite out of a caregiver’s shoulder. When this occurs, adults should use prompt, clear signals to communicate that children must not bite people. “No,” said sharply, would be an appropriate response.

These experimental biters may simply want to touch, smell and taste other people in order to learn more about their world. Their muscles are developing, and they need to experiment. Provide them with a variety of surfaces to play on and a colourful selection of toys to stimulate them during this stage of exploration.

This type of biter may also be motivated by teething pain. **Offer children appropriate things to chew on for relief: frozen bagels, very cold large carrots, teething biscuits or a safe teething ring.**

The 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. Even though the child may not have intended to harm another person, adults must react with disapproval. First, tend to the victim immediately. Then explain to the biter that biting hurts others and is not allowed the caregiver’s job is to keep all children safe.

You may help frustrated biters by teaching them appropriate language to show their feelings or 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.

The Threatened Biter

Some children, feeling that they are endangered, bite in self-defence. They may be overwhelmed by their surroundings, and bite as a means of regaining control. In this case, **use the intervention techniques already mentioned, and assure the child that his rights and possessions are safe.**

Children may become threatened by situations such as newly separated parents, the death of a grandparent, or a mother returning to the work force. The threatened biter may require additional nurturing, particularly if the danger is along the lines of physical

violence at home or in the immediate neighbourhood. **In any case, the bond between child and caregiver should be as warm and reassuring as possible.**

The Power Biter

Some children experience a strong need for autonomy and control. As soon as they see the response they get from biting, the behaviour is strongly reinforced. Give the biter choices throughout the day and reinforce positive social behaviour (like sharing and saying thanks). If the biter gets attention when they are not biting, they will not have to resort to aggressive behaviour to feel a sense of personal power.

Never hit or “bite back” a child for biting. This communicates that violence is an appropriate way to handle emotion. The approach should be calm and educational. A child should not experience any reward for biting not even the “reward” of negative attention.

Parents and caregivers must co-operate to prevent children from biting. If children are permitted to demonstrate such behaviour at home there will be no chance of eliminating it in the setting, program, or family child care home. Working as a team, educators 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 behaviour.

Take the time to look for patterns in the biter's environment and emotional state at each episode. Does the child always bite the same individual? Is the biter simply exhausted, or hungry? 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.