WHY CHILDREN BITE



A Family Companion to *No Biting*

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for Child Care Solutions

Why Children Bite

Biting is alarming to parents because we don't expect our children to be bitten—or to bite. We think of biting as a vicious act, not as something a small child would do. Why does biting happen? What can and should be done?

Parents and caregivers who have been successful in dealing with biting have found that it helps to start with some basic understandings:

- As upsetting and as wrong as it is, biting is not unusual toddler behavior, especially when toddlers are in groups.
- Toddlers bite for many reasons, most of which are related to the development of children at this age.
- When toddlers bite, the most effective way to get them to stop is an approach that combines observation, understanding, teaching, and environmental changes.

Child care providers with experience caring for toddlers are not usually surprised by biting. They are saddened and frustrated by it, but they are rarely surprised, because they almost certainly have seen biting many times throughout their years of caring for toddlers. They know that when toddlers are in groups, biting is a possibility.

It is tempting for adults to look at biting as a deliberate act of aggression by a mean toddler. Instead, biting is much more likely to be the result of a toddler's inability to cope with what is happening around him. Toddler teachers understand this and know there are many reasons toddlers may bite.

When we as adults try to understand toddler biting, we usually look for reasons that are obvious and logical to us. We can understand a toddler getting frustrated and angry if another child takes a toy away from her. We don't want the child to react by biting, but in this situation, we can see why she might. There are, however, times when we can't see an obvious or logical reason, and it seems to us that the child bites for no reason at all. When toddlers bite, there is always a reason, but it isn't always obvious to adults. The first step in helping children stop biting is to understand what causes the biting. This starts with knowing the various reasons toddlers may bite.

Reasons Toddlers May Bite

The reasons toddlers may bite fall into three general categories:

- biting related to development
- biting related to expressing feelings
- biting related to a difficult environment

Development

Toddler development has been described as an "explosion" because toddlers develop so many new skills and abilities at once. They are driven to try out their new abilities, like getting other people to understand what they are saying, which can be frustrating, and they want to be independent at the very same time that they need help from adults. All of this can result in a toddler becoming overwhelmed, which may cause her to bite. Toddlers may also bite as a result of

- teething pain;
- experimenting with the movement of their mouths as they learn to chew and swallow without choking;
- exploring everything around them using their senses—including mouthing toys and people;
- feeling that others are too close because they don't yet have a good understanding of the space around them;

- their developing autonomy—that is, feeling a sense of independence and power;
- struggling to be understood as they learn to talk;
- imitating adults who say they love them so much, they could "just eat you up."

Expressing Feelings

Toddlers are easily frustrated and do not have much self-control. They are likely to bite when they are feeling

- frustrated or angry;
- anxious or tense about situations they don't understand;
- excited, even for happy reasons.

Environment

Toddlers may bite when they are in environments that don't meet their physical and emotional needs. They may bite when they experience

- overstimulation and overcrowding;
- inappropriate expectations, such as having to wait;
- a schedule that doesn't meet their needs.

Best Responses to Biting

In a child care setting, adults must respond to both the child who bit and the child who was bitten.

The child who was bitten needs

- **comfort and care**—This includes first aid for the bite and tender comforting. When the skin is not broken, caregivers should offer ice or cold packs to relieve the pain of the bite. When the skin is broken, first aid should include careful washing of the wound and, if the child wants, ice or cold packs for the pain.
- **reassurance and recognition**—The child needs to hear that it was not right and not fair that he was bitten. Teachers should tell the child, "Someone bit you. That's not right. It hurts, and no one should bite you." Even though adults may want the child who bit to apologize, apologizing doesn't make much of an impression on toddlers and doesn't help stop the biting.
- **advice and support**—If the child is able to talk, teachers can help her learn to loudly say "no" or "stop" if she is worried someone will hurt her. The child can also learn to put up her hand, palm out, like a traffic officer. This is also a powerful "stop" message. These actions will help the child act on her feelings. They can help her avoid feeling powerless, and they won't hurt anyone else. They may also help fend off bites. When the child sends a "stop" message, teachers can support her. "Good for you. You were worried someone might hurt you, and you said, 'no.'"

If a child is bitten as a result of retaliation by another child, teachers can help the bitten child understand the situation. "When you hit him, he bit you. We don't want to hurt anyone—hitting or biting." Saying this doesn't suggest the child deserved to be bitten, but does relate important information to him because, like all toddlers, he is learning about cause and effect.

The child who bites needs

- **a clear message of disapproval**—No matter the reason for the bite, biting is never the right thing to do. Adults must use a serious tone of voice and specific words so that the child knows what he did was wrong. The message must be brief, specific, and serious.
- **an understanding of how his biting affected the other child**—The child needs to know that his bite hurt the other child, and that it's not okay to hurt people. It is important for the child to understand the effect of his biting. Adults need to talk about this in a manner that is clear, calm, serious, and brief.
- **advice about what she should do instead of biting**—Adults should teach the child how to ask for what she wants or show her how to get what she wants—her blanket, for example, if she is frustrated and needs comfort. Adults should help the child learn how to communicate feelings of power by expressing herself with gusto—through body language, facial expressions, and words—rather than through biting.

- **redirection or a resulting action that relates to the reason for the bite**—For example, if a child bit in order to get a toy away from another child, the toy should be taken away from the biter.
- **adults to look at the situation and the environment**—Adults need to consider the reasons the child bit and possible changes they might make to address them. For example, the environment may be crowded, so adults could rearrange the room to provide more space. Or, there may not be enough sensory activities to help toddlers relieve frustration and anxiety, so adults could add sensory materials and experiences.

What Doesn't Work

When adults are frustrated by toddler biting, they don't want to feel powerless. They want to respond in some way and often look for "something, anything" to try. Many responses, however, are not based on an understanding of either biting or toddlers. Some responses are mean spirited and unfair to toddlers, biting the child back or forcing something into the child's mouth, for example. Adults who do this may believe they are helping toddlers realize that biting hurts, but toddlers do not think with that kind of logic. What toddlers do realize is that an adult they trusted just hurt them for no good reason!

Some responses are ineffective because they don't address the reasons for the biting and don't look for ways to change the environment or teach the child. A prime example of an ineffective response is removing the child—sending the child to the director's office or to time out, for instance.

Time out is not a very effective way to change toddler behavior. Understanding time out requires a certain amount of logic, and toddlers simply are not logical. Adults assume that toddlers who sit in time out are thinking about biting and about not doing it again so they won't end up once more in time out. Toddlers who sit in time out are actually much more likely to be thinking about getting up and about what they want to do after that.

What a Child Care Program Should Do

Teachers in child care programs that are knowledgeable and experienced at caring for toddlers know that biting is a possibility when toddlers are in groups. These teachers have thought about biting and their programs have developed policies designed to take positive steps toward working with the child so that the biting stops, rather than forcing a child who bites out of the center. These teachers have had training and developed skills to help children when biting occurs, and teachers and program administrators understand and acknowledge parents' strong feelings about biting. They have information on biting for parents and keep them informed about specific steps they're taking to help stop the biting. They inform parents every time their child bites or is bitten.

The goal is to support all children whether they bite or are bitten.

Centers that are serious about working on biting keep the name of the child who bit confidential. This helps the teachers focus all their energy on strategies to help the child rather than on naming and blaming.

If Your Child Is Being Bitten

No matter how much any of us knows and understands about biting, it is still frightening and upsetting when our own child is bitten. Parents may want to focus their attention on punishing the child who bit or even on punishing the child's parents. This is understandable, but it doesn't help the biting situation.

If your child has been bitten, here are ways you can help:

- Ask your child's teachers what strategies they are using to help the child who bit learn to stop.
- Ask your child's teachers what strategies they are using to help keep your child safe. If the teachers mention specific advice and support, use the same ideas and language when you talk with your child.
- Take your cue from your child. If your child seems worried, let her hear you talk with her teacher about how you will both help keep her safe. If she seems to have forgotten the biting, do not keep bringing it up. Instead, if you still have concerns, talk with the teacher by yourself.

If Your Child Is Biting

You may feel responsible for your toddler's biting and want to do something about it at home. Nevertheless, most of the work will be done in your child's program because that's where the biting is happening. Toddlers are more likely to bite when they are in groups than when they're at home.

Here are ways you can help your child's teachers as they work on the biting:

- Share any ideas you may have about the reasons your child is biting.
- If you play with your child by pretending to "eat him up," stop for a while because he may be trying to imitate you while actually biting.
- Learn how to effectively express disapproval for biting.
- Help your child develop language skills and learn to appropriately express her feelings.
- Avoid lectures, punishments, rewards, or bribes. They don't help stop the biting.

This is a family companion to *No Biting: Policy and Practice for Toddler Programs,* third edition, a resource book developed by a task force of experienced child care professionals in Syracuse, New York. *No Biting* was first published in 2002 by Redleaf Press and has been used by many child care programs across the country as a resource to address biting.

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