

## Biting



Biting is a behavior that is not uncommon among young children. The reasons why children bite other people differ from child to child.

It is quite natural for children around one year of age to bite their parents or anyone else who happens to be within reach. Most often in this age group, children bite to reduce the pressure on their sensitive gums due to teething.

True biting, not due to teething, can become a problem with children between 18 and 30 months of age. Children at this age are often unaware of the pain that biting causes to other children and to adults.

Although it is common for children to bite others while playing, this type of behavior warrants immediate action. Not only is biting extremely painful for children who are bitten,

but it often leads to more fighting within the play group. Biters also run the risk of becoming unpopular with their playmates.

Young children often bite in response to frustration, anger, or excitement. Thus, it is important for parents and caretakers to be aware of what situations lead to biting behaviors. Such knowledge may help parents better understand the causes of biting behavior.

### What Can Be Done?

Biting is not something that has to be endured until children are old enough to "know better." There are many steps that can be taken to both prevent and solve biting problems.

#### Prevention

**\*Set Limits.** To prevent biting from occurring, parents and caretakers should set limits before young children play together. Rules should be simple, like taking turns and sharing. Parents and caretakers should consistently enforce these rules.

**\*Catch children being good.** Parents and caretakers should compliment children for getting

along. Complimenting children will serve as a reward for good behavior. It will provide recognition to children who behave instead of to those who misbehave.

**\*Supervise play closely.** Parents and caretakers should pay attention to what is going on in the play group. They should intervene before conflicts get out of hand. Structuring play periods may cut down on the opportunities that lead to biting.

**\*Watch what you teach.** Parents and caretakers who use yelling, spanking, or any aggressive behavior as a form of discipline for children run the risk of teaching children that aggressive behavior is acceptable in certain situations, especially in solving conflicts. Adults who hit, yell, and/or throw things when they are mad are teaching their children to be aggressive when they are mad.

### **Intervention**

**\*Identify times when biting occurs.** Parents and caretakers should observe times and situations when children resort to biting. They should use this information to change or avoid these situations. For example, if children bite

whenever they play in a large play group, steps should be taken to limit the number of children in the group. Or, if children bite whenever they are with a specific playmate, steps should be taken to separate the two children during play time. If a pattern to the biting behavior is detected, the situations that lead to the biting behavior, if possible, should be avoided. It may be necessary for parents and caretakers to simplify play times, to make play groups smaller, and to make play periods shorter.

**\*Use brief time outs.** Parents and caretakers should use a brief reprimand, such as, "No biting. Biting hurts. Time out." They should then place the children who bite in time-out. These children should be allowed to return to the play group after they are quiet and under control. Parents or caretakers should then provide positive attention, showing children who bite that there are better ways to communicate and be noticed.

**\*Provide alternatives to biting.** Parents and caretakers should tell children what they can do instead of biting. For example, "Instead of biting when you're mad, just walk away." Or, "Instead of biting when you're mad, ask the teacher for

help." Children should then be asked to repeat the alternatives back.

**\*Focus attention on the child who was bitten.** Parents and caretakers should give all the toys, fuss, and attention to the bitten child. If children bite for attention, or to get a reaction from adults, they will soon learn that there are better ways to be noticed. If, for example, one child bites another in a dispute over a toy, the toy should be given to the bitten child. This will teach biters that biting will not bring about the desired result.

**\*Seek professional help for persistent biting.** If biting continues to be a chronic problem despite repeated attempts to intervene, professional help may be necessary to clarify the reasons for biting and to eliminate the behavior.

### What Not To Do

Biting should **not** be ignored in the hope that it will quickly go away. In most cases, it will not. No matter how frustrated parents become in their attempts to eliminate biting in children, biting children back to teach them a lesson is **NEVER** recommended. If this sends any message at all it is that adults hurt people, too. In most cases, very

young children are unlikely to make any connection between the hurt they feel from being bitten, and the hurt they have caused by biting.

### Things To Remember

In most cases biters cease biting as their language skills increase. As language skills improve, children become able to use words to express frustration and anger. This usually occurs around the age of three. With firmness and consistency in confronting and dealing with biting behavior, most biters get the message and quickly stop biting.

Finally, a bite that breaks the skin can cause an infection. If the skin is broken, it is important to wash the injury thoroughly with soap and water, and then apply a sterile dressing and secure it with adhesive tape. A doctor should look at the wound as soon as possible.



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