

Biting in toddlers

Toddlers often find themselves in a tough spot. They have a hard time controlling their impulses, but they're not really sophisticated enough thinkers to understand others' feelings and needs. This is not a failing on the parents' part; it's simply where their brain's development is.

Infants and toddlers bite for a variety of reasons: sometimes it's merely another way to explore their environment. But it can also be a reflection of being tired, stressed out, powerless, frustrated or over-stimulated. Regardless of the cause, the effect is usually not pleasant: an unhappy victim, an embarrassed caregiver and "the culprit", whose own emotions are often in chaos.

How can parents and other caring adults handle the potential for biting? One way is prevention. When the child is not upset or aggressive, reinforce the idea of being kind or not hurting others. This may be done through imaginative play (puppets, for example) or storybooks. Say "Kids like it better when other boys and girls are nice to them." Take advantage of opportunities that arise where your child is not the culprit. If you see two other children fighting, pushing or biting, talk about the scenario with your little one. Keep it simple and focus on concrete observations, such as: "Look how sad that boy is; the other child made him cry. Poor little guy. Maybe we can go play ball with him and make him feel better."

You are delivering several key lessons this way: (1) We can tell how others are feeling by their facial expressions – tears, smiles, etc.; (2) There are words (labels) that match those expressions which young children can be taught to use; (3) It is a good idea to try to help others who are in distress. All of these lessons are related to empathy, which develops more fully as the child grows. Toddlers vary in the degree to which they are comfortable showing and talking about how they feel, but even shy children will benefit from these early discussions of how to deal with feeling bad or sad in public.

If, perchance, your child is directly involved in a biting episode, your response can help either increase or decrease your child's anxiety. Getting very upset and raising your voice at the biter can escalate what might have been a minor tussle. If there are no major skin marks, it's better to firmly separate the biter from the victim and calmly explain that behavior is "a NO". Dwelling on the biting gives the toddlers attention, and even negative attention can sometimes increase an undesirable behavior. It's best to deal with the situation firmly and quickly and move on. Again, teaching the children how to repair the problem by offering to share a treat or join in another activity (with adult supervision at first) is an important goal.

If the bite is more serious, or if there has been a pattern of aggression with the biter, then a more dramatic response is needed.

First, show the victim the immediate attention – carefully disinfecting the wound, applying both the Band-Aid and the kiss or hug to ease the hurt. If it's possible for another adult to make sure the aggressor sees all this activity, that is ideal, especially in child care settings. Why? Due to proximity, sharing possessions and sheer numbers of peers, biting is fairly commonly encountered in child care. (Note: this does NOT mean that child care causes children to be more aggressive!) To reduce imitation of the biting, it helps for the other children to see the tears evoked, and the punishment that the biter receives. Usually this is in the form of a time-out, following by a restating of the rules (No biting!) before the child is

allowed back to play. Center-based caregivers will typically document what happened and have a brief discussion with both families as follow-up. Most of the time, these are isolated occasions which decrease in number with the onset of self-control and language skills. They tend not to be a big deal.

If, however, one child repeatedly chooses to be aggressive with the same child or is an “opportunistic” biter (meaning s/he will bite whenever another child invades her space or takes away a toy), more intervention is needed. Outcomes may range from close cooperation between parents and caregivers to resolve the problem, to moving to a different classroom/teacher, to changing child care centers to needing to refer a child for further evaluation.

Although biting is an unpleasant event for all involved, parents and caregivers should try their best to use a calm, thoughtful approach rather than jump to conclusions (“What a brat!”), especially if they didn’t directly witness the bite. Focus instead on moving forward and encouraging the youngsters to make up and play nicer in the future.

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