

early years are learning years

Biters: Why they do it and what to do about it

Although biting isn't "abnormal" in the sense that one out of ten toddlers and two-year-olds does it, it is a disturbing and potentially harmful behavior 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 behavior 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're dealing with will help you develop an appropriate discipline technique.

1 The experimental biter. An infant or young child may take an experimental bite out of a mother's breast or 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 colorful selection of toys to stimulate children 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.

2 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 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.

3 The threatened biter. Some children, feeling they are endangered, bite in self-defense. 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 neighborhood. In any case, the bond between child and caregiver should be as warm and reassuring as possible.

4 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 behavior is strongly reinforced. Give the biter choices throughout the day and reinforce positive social behavior (like sharing and saying thanks). If the biter gets attention when she is not biting, she will not have to resort to aggressive behavior 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 cooperate to prevent children from biting. If children are permitted to demonstrate such behavior at home, there will be no chance of eliminating it in the center, 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 behavior.

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.

Resources:

Galambos Stone, J. 1969. *A Guide to Discipline*. Washington, DC: NAEYC #302/\$2.

Greenberg, P. 1991. *Character Development: Encouraging Self-Esteem & Self-Discipline in Infants, Toddlers, & Two-Year-Olds*. Washington, DC: NAEYC #175/\$8.

Honig, A.S. 1989. *Love & Learn: Discipline for Young Children*. Washington, DC: NAEYC #528/50¢.

NAEYC. 1988. *Discipline: Appropriate Guidance of Young Children (video tape)*. Washington, DC: NAEYC #855/\$39.

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