



Biting in the Child Care Setting

Biting causes more upset feelings than any other behavior in child care programs. Because it seems so primitive, we tend to react differently to biting than we do to hitting, grabbing or other aggressive acts. Because it is upsetting and potentially dangerous, it is important for caregivers and parents to address this behavior when it occurs. Though it is normal for infants and toddlers to mouth people and toys, and for many two-year-olds to try biting, most do not continue after the age of three.

Why do children bite and what can we do?

Children bite for many different reasons, and careful observation will guide your appropriate and effective intervention. Taking the time to understand why a particular child bites is invaluable in changing the behavior while maintaining a positive caregiving relationship.

Watch to see when and where biting happens, who is involved, what the child experiences, and what happens before and after.

Ask yourself why the child bites others. Is there a pattern to the situations, places, times or other children when biting occurs? What individual or temperamental needs might influence the child's behavior? Have there been changes in the child's health, family or home situation which might affect his/her behavior?

Adapt your environment, schedule or guidance methods to teach gentle and positive ways to handle the child's feelings and needs.

When a child bites another child

Intervene immediately between the child who bit and the bitten child. Stay calm; don't overreact, yell or give a lengthy explanation.

Talk briefly to the child who bit. Use your tone of voice and facial expression to show that biting is not acceptable. Look into the child's eyes and speak calmly but firmly. Say, "I do not like it when you bite people." For a child with more limited language, just say "No biting people." You can point out how the biter's behavior affected the other child. "You hurt him and he's crying."

Help the child who was bitten. Comfort the child and apply first aid. If the skin is broken, wash the wound with warm water and soap. Apply an ice pack or cool cloth to help prevent swelling. Tell the parents what happened, and recommend that they have the child seen by a physician if the skin is broken or there are any signs of infection (redness or swelling). Encourage the child who was bitten to tell the biter "You hurt me."

Encourage the child who bit to help the other child by getting the ice pack, etc.

Observe universal precautions if there is bleeding.

Alert the staff to the incident.

Notify the parents of all children who were involved. Let them know what happened but do not name or label the child who bit. Reassure them by telling how you handled the incident, and involve the parents in planning how to prevent and handle future biting.

When biting continues after several weeks

Plan a more concentrated program of intervention.

Meet with the parents of the child who is biting to discuss possible reasons and plan together to change the biting behavior.

Assign a special person to stay with the child to carry out the plan determined by the parents and staff with the aim of teaching and giving positive attention for acceptable social behavior.

When the child bites, use the techniques listed above and remove the child from the area where the biting took place. Tell the child he or she cannot play in the area where the biting took place for a while. (This is redirection, not a "time-out.")

If the child continues biting or does not seem to care about the consequences, seek professional help and/or explore the possibility that the child needs an environment with fewer children and more one-on-one adult attention.

Older preschoolers who continue to bite should be referred for more assessment and help.

What can programs do to handle biting?

Develop a policy for guidance and discipline which includes biting. Clearly state how you will handle biting occurrences for both the child who was bitten and the child who bites.

Communicate your policy with parents and staff before biting occurs. Reassure parents that this behavior is not uncommon and that you plan to work with the child in developing positive social skills.

Prevent biting by being alert to potential problem situations.

- Evaluate your program for stressors such as changes in providers or children, crowded play areas or insufficient materials which make children wait for turns, schedules requiring children to make many transitions, tired children at the end of the day.
- When a child is starting in your program, ask the parents whether biting or other aggressive behavior has been an issue and how it has been handled in the past.
- Be alert for children who are likely to bite based on past history.
- Remember that biting tends to be more common during the late summer and early fall months (perhaps due to lighter clothing or changes in the grouping of children).

Reinforce desired behavior. Notice and acknowledge when you like what the child is doing. Provide positive guidance for showing empathy or social behavior, such as patting a crying child, offering to take turns with a toy or hugging gently.

Help the child make connections with others. Encourage special relationships with caregivers, talk about how others feel, express empathy for the feelings of other children.

Do not label, humiliate or isolate a child who bites another child.

References

Guide to Social-Emotional Growth and Development, The Program for Infant/Toddler Caregivers, Far West Laboratory and the Child Development Division of the California State Department of Education, 1991.

Biting, Fact Sheet on Preschool Children’s Behavior, Seattle-King County Department of Public Health, Date March 19, 1992.

Children Who Bite, by Donna Witmer, Scholastic Pre-K Today, March 1998.

When Children Bite. National Network for Child Care. Christine Todd. www.nncc.org/Guidance/dc16_children.bite.html.

Biting. KidsHealth.org. <https://kidshealth.org/en/parents/stop-biting.html>.

When a child	You can
Experiments by biting	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Immediately say “no” in a firm voice. • Give him a variety of toys and materials to touch, smell and taste and encourage sensory-motor exploration.
Has teething discomfort	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide cold teething toys or chewy foods.
Is becoming independent	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide opportunities to make age-appropriate choices and have some control (the pretzel or the cracker, the yellow or the blue ball). • Notice and give positive attention as new self-help skills and independence develop.
Is using muscles in new ways	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide a variety of play materials (hard/soft, rough/smooth, heavy/light). Plan for plenty of active play both indoors and outdoors.
Is learning to play with other children	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Try to guide behavior if it seems rough. (Take the child’s hand and say, “Touch Jorge gently. He likes that.”) • Prevent conflicts by offering more than one of any especially attractive toy and creating open play space. • Reinforce pro-social behavior (like taking turns with toys or patting a crying child).
Is frustrated in expressing his/her needs and wants	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Read” the child and say what he is trying to communicate. (“You feel mad when Ari takes your truck.” “You want me to pay attention to you.”)
Is threatened by new or changing situations such as a mother returning to work, a new baby, or parents separating	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Provide some special nurturing and be as warm and reassuring as possible, adding some stability and continuity to the child’s life. • Help the child talk about feelings even when he or she says thing like “I hate my new baby.”

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