

Biting – A Fact Sheet for Families

Biting is a common but upsetting behavior of toddlers. It is important for parents to address biting when it occurs. This fact sheet provides tips for parents and program staff on how to better understand issues around biting.



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.

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

Offer the bitten child comfort and first aid. Wash broken skin with warm water and soap. Observe general precautions if there is bleeding. Apply an ice pack or cool cloth to help prevent swelling. If the bitten child is a guest, tell the parents what happened. Suggest the bitten child be seen by a health care provider if the skin is broken or there are any signs of infection (redness or swelling).

Preventing biting

Reinforce desired behavior. Notice and acknowledge when you like what your child is doing, especially for showing empathy or social behavior, such as patting a crying child, offering to take turns with a toy or hugging gently. Do not label, humiliate or isolate a child who bites.

Discourage play which involves "pretend" biting, or seems too rough and out of control. Help the child make connections with others.

Why do children bite and what can we do?

Children bite for many different reasons, so in order to respond effectively it's best to try and find out why they are biting.

If your child experiments by biting immediately say "no" in a firm voice, and give him a variety of toys to touch, smell and taste and encourage sensory-motor exploration.

If your child has teething discomfort, provide cold teething toys or safe, chewy foods.

If your child is becoming independent, provide opportunities to make age-appropriate choices and have some control (the bread or the cracker, the yellow or the blue ball), and notice and give positive attention as new self-help skills and independence develop.

If your child is using muscles in new ways, provide a variety of play materials (hard/soft, rough/smooth, heavy/light) and plan for plenty of active play indoors and outdoors.

If your child is learning to play with other children, try to guide behavior if it seems rough (take the child's hand and say, "Touch Jorge gently—he likes that") and reinforce pro-social behavior (such as taking turns with toys or patting a crying child).

If your child is frustrated in expressing his/her needs and wants, state what she is trying to communicate ("you feel mad when Ari takes your truck" or "you want me to pay attention to you").

If your child is threatened by new or changing situations such as a parent returning to work, a new baby, or parents separating, provide special nurturing and be as warm and reassuring as possible, and help him or her talk about feelings even when he or she says thing like "I hate my new baby."

- Consult with a professional if your child seems to be acting out due to unusual stress.
- If the child continues biting over several weeks or does not seem to care about the consequences, seek professional help. It is unusual for a preschool age (3-5 year old) child to continue to bite and he/she need to be evaluated for developmental concerns.

Biting – A Fact Sheet for Families. California Childcare Health Program. 2001. English.

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