

BITING IN THE TODDLER YEARS

Biting is very common amongst groups of young children, for all types of reasons, but whatever the reason for biting most parents find it shocking and disturbing and they want it to stop – quickly! Understanding why the young child bites is the first step in preventing biting as well as teaching the child alternatives to biting.

Most common reasons and solutions for biting are:

The Experimental biter: It is not uncommon for an infant or toddler to explore their world, including people, by biting. Infants and toddlers place many things into their mouths to learn more about them. Teach the child that some things can be bitten, like food and some things cannot be bitten, like people and animals. Another example of the experimental biter is the toddler who wants to learn about cause and effect. This child is wandering “what will happen when I bite my friend or my mummy?”. Provide the child with many other opportunities to learn about cause and effect, with toys and activities.

The Teething biter: Infants and toddlers experience a lot of discomfort when they are teething. A natural response is to apply pressure to the gums by biting on things. It is not unusual for a teething child to bear down on a person's shoulder or breast to relieve some of their teething pain. Provide appropriate items for the child to teeth on like teething biscuits or teething rings.

The Social Biter: Many times an infant or toddler bites when they are trying to interact with another child. These young children have not yet developed the social skills to indicate “Hello, I want to play with you”. So, sometimes they approach a friend with a bite to say hello. Watch young children very closely to assist them in positive interactions with their friends.

The Frustrated Biter: Young children are often confronted with situations that are frustrating. Like when a friend takes their toy or when mummy is unable to respond to their needs as quickly as they would like. These toddlers lack the social and emotional skills to cope with their feelings in an acceptable way. They also lack the language skills to cope with their feelings in an acceptable way or to communicate their feelings. At these times it is not unusual for a toddler to attempt to deal with the frustration by biting whoever is nearby. Notice when a child is struggling with frustration and be ready to intervene. It is also important to provide words for the child to help them learn how to express their feelings.

The Threatened Biter: When some young children fear a sense of danger they respond by biting as a self defence. Especially when they are feeling overwhelmed by their environment. Provide the toddler with nurturing support. to help them understand that they and their possessions are safe.

The Imitative Biter: Imitation is one of the many ways that young children learn so it is not unusual for a child to observe a child bite, then try it out for themselves. Offer the child many examples of loving kind behaviour. Never bite a child to demonstrate how it feels to be bitten.

The Attention–Seeker Biter: Children love attention, especially from adults. When parents give loads of attention, for negative behaviour such as biting, children learn that biting is a good way to get attention. Provide lots of positive attention for young children each day. It is also important to minimise the negative attention to behaviour such as biting.

The Power Biter: Toddlers have a strong need for independence and control. Very often the response children get from biting helps to satisfy this need. Provide many opportunities for the toddler to make simple choices throughout the day. This will help the toddler feel the sense of control they need. It is also important to reinforce the toddler's attempts at positive social behaviour each day.

As with all potentially harmful situations involving children, prevention is the key. Adults must be active observers of children to prevent biting. In those times when close supervision doesn't work, the adult must intervene as quickly as possible and as calmly as possible.

WHEN INTERVENING BEFORE THE POTENTIAL BITE HAS OCCURRED:

- Talk to the child by offering words like "I see that you wanted that toy!".
- Demonstrate patience and understanding.
- Offer a solution like "We have another red truck over here. Let's go and get it".
- Demonstrate alternative ways of interacting. Always try to stay focused on the positive behaviour you want to see, without reminding the child of the negative behaviour.

WHEN YOUR CHILD BITES:

- Comfort the child who was bitten.
- Provide an ice pack to reduce pain and swelling.
- Provide comfort for the wounded child.
- Help the child who bit to understand that they hurt their friend.
- Reinforce the rule that we don't hurt our friends. Help both children to understand that your job is to keep them safe. Say "I know you are angry, but I can't let you bite people".
- When the environment is calm again the goal is to teach assertiveness and communication skills to both the child who bites and the child who gets bitten.

NEVER HIT OR BITE A CHILD WHO HAS BITTEN. THIS WILL ONLY TEACH THE CHILD THAT VIOLENCE IS OK.

Young children need lots of practice to learn the fine art of interacting with their friends in a positive way. They need positive guidance and support from parents. When children gain maturity and experience and become preschoolers (3+ years old) they are likely to have developed more appropriate ways of interacting.

IN SUMMARY:

Biting is distressing for everyone involved, but it is only a phase and it will pass. Try and look out for particular times of the day when it is a problem and/or particular situations and try and pre-empt the behaviour. Be consistent and don't give attention to the bad behaviour, instead comfort the victim.