Biting Information

Why do children bite and what strategies can be used to reduce and prevent it?

Biting is a very common behaviour amongst toddlers. Many children between the ages of 1 year and 3 years go through a biting phase which they eventually outgrow. This means that there are a lot of concerned parents and childcare practitioners out there! You are not alone. The good news is that there is a lot parents and practitioners can do to reduce and ultimately, eliminate biting.

To set the stage for effectively addressing this challenge, avoid calling or thinking of the child as a "biter" and ask others not to use this term. Labelling children can actually lead to them taking on the identity assigned to them, which can intensify biting behaviour rather than eliminate it.

Children bite in order to cope with a challenge or fulfil a need. For example, the child may be biting to express a strong feeling (like frustration), communicate a need for personal space (maybe another child is standing too close) or to satisfy a need for oral stimulation. Trying your best to understand the underlying cause of the biting will help you develop an effective response. This makes it more likely that you will be successful in eliminating the behaviour.

Why do toddlers bite?

Toddlers might bite if they:

1. **Lack the language skills** necessary for expressing important needs or strong feelings like anger, frustration, joy, etc. Biting is a substitute for the messages he can't yet express in words like:
   - I am so cross with you
   - You are standing too close to me
   - I am really excited
   - I want to play with you

2. **Are overwhelmed by the sounds, light or activity level** in this setting

3. **Are experimenting to see what will happen -** Very young children use their mouths to explore. Just about everything infants or toddlers pick up eventually winds up in their mouths. Children this age aren't yet able to prevent themselves from biting the object of their interest. Part of exploration is curiosity. Toddlers experiment to see what kind of reaction their actions will provoke. They'll bite down on a friend or sibling to hear the surprised exclamation, not realising how painful the experience is for that person.

4. **Need more active or stimulating playtime**

5. **Are over-tired**

6. **Are teething** - When babies bite, it may be because they're teething. They're just doing it to relieve the pain of their swollen, tender gums.

7. **Have a need for oral stimulation**

8. **They're craving attention.** In older children, biting is just one of several bad behaviours used to get attention. When a child feels ignored, discipline is at least one way of getting noticed - even if the attention is negative rather than positive.

If you think one of these reasons might by why your child is biting, you can find specific strategies on how to respond in the section: **'specific strategies for responding to biting'**.

What can I do to prevent biting?

As you observe the child at play, you can begin to anticipate when a bite might occur. Use the following questions to help you to identify the kinds of situations often lead to biting:

- What happened immediately before the bite?
- Who was the child playing with?
- Who was bitten? Is it always the same child or different children each time?
- What was the child doing?
- Where was the child?
- Who was caring for the child?

If you see signs that the child might be on the verge of biting, you can:

- Distract the child with a toy, book or activity. Suggest looking out the window or take a walk to another room or outside. The goal is to reduce the tension and shift the child's attention.

- Suggest how the child might handle the situation that is triggering the need to bite. For example: "Marcus, you can tell Ana: You are a little too close to me. I don't like it when you touch my hair." If you think the child might be biting due to a need for oral stimulation, offer your child something he can safely bite and chew—a cracker, some carrot sticks, or a teether.

- Suggest ways to share. In a group setting, make sure that the classroom has more than one of the most popular toys. **Sharing is one of the most common triggers for biting**.

Reading books about biting can also help. As you read, ask your child how the different characters might be feeling. If you have an older toddler, you can ask him to "read" the book to you, by telling you what is happening based on the pictures. Some titles to recommend include:

- Teeth Are Not for Biting by Elizabeth Verdick
- No Biting by Karen Katz
- No Biting Louise by Margie Palatini

Specific strategies for responding to biting

The strategies below can help you respond based on your best guess about the reason the child is biting.

If you think biting is a substitute for not having the language skills to express him/herself you can:

- Put into words what you guess the child might be thinking: "Tanya, do you want to have a turn on the tricycle? You can ask Henry; Can I have a turn now"?
- Help the child express his feelings in appropriate ways. If the child is really angry, you can say: Max, you are so cross! You are really, really angry. Then suggest a way to deal with these feelings: Making angry lion faces and growling, ripping up newspapers, punching the couch cushions, banging a drum, jumping up and down—whatever is acceptable to you.
- Reinforce the child when he uses words to share his feelings: 'You asked me for a turn blowing bubbles instead of grabbing them. That's so good. You can have a go now'.
- Give the child age-appropriate choices, for example, about what or who to play with. Having choices gives children a sense of control and can reduce biting.
- Consider a speech-language assessment if you think the child's verbal skills might be delayed.

If the child is easily overwhelmed by lights, sound, and activity, you can:

- Keep television and radio off or on low volumes.
- Avoid big groups, think about the noise in the room and about how to manage outdoor play.
- Schedule activities with a lot of sensory input for the child's "best" times of day, when he is fed and well-rested.
- Talk with the child's parents and other caregivers about his difficulty managing a lot of sensory input. Share ideas about ways to reduce the stimulation at home and in nursery.
- Give your key child a firm "bear" hug when you sense s/he is feeling stressed and out of control and perhaps about to bite. This can help children feel "held together" which can be very soothing.
- Create a "cosy corner" in the room with pillows, books and other quiet toys like stuffed animals, or use a play tent as a safe place to take a break. Explain that this is a place the child can go if he wants to be alone or feels out of control and needs to cool down. Suggest that the child's parents consider having a "cosy space" as well.

If the child is experimenting to see what will happen when he bites, you can:

- Provide immediate, firm—but unemotional (as best you can)—feedback (No biting. Biting hurts.).
- Shift attention away from the child who bit to the child who was bitten.
- Help the child understand about cause-and-effect: You bit Maisie and now she is crying. When you bite, it hurts your friends. Biting is never okay. Do this once at the time of the bite but then stop and repeat it later when the child is calm or talk about it as part of a story as doing it at the time gives the child lots of attention, albeit negative and may actually increase the problem.

If the child needs more active or stimulating play, you can:

- Set aside time each day to be active. Go outdoors or for a walk. Turn music on and encourage child to dance with you. Think about other ways in which the child can be active.
- Talk with the child's other caregivers to ensure that active play is a part of everyday. Toddlers who bite should not be punished. This may make the problem worse.
- Build activity into the child's everyday routines – be aware of transitions, getting ready for lunch and beginnings and ends of days when biting may be more likely to occur.
- Ensure that activities which interest them are offered to the child and are appropriate to their age and developmental level. Activities which are not sufficiently stimulating or activities which are too advanced may result in boredom or frustration which may manifest itself in biting.

If the child is over-tired, you can:

- Set up a schedule of naps or, if s/he won't nap, "quiet times" when she is resting.
- Avoid potentially stressful activities on days or at times when s/he is very tired.
- Talk to parents about possibly incrementally moving her bedtime 30 to 60 minutes earlier over a few weeks.
- Find out from parents how s/he has slept so that if s/he has not slept well or is tired so staff can shadow her, in order to reduce the possibility of a biting incident.

If the child is teething, you can:

- Offer him/her a teething ring or cold facecloth to bite.

If the child has a need for oral stimulation:

- Offer him/her crunchy (healthy) snacks at regular intervals across the day. Research has found that this intervention can actually reduce biting incidents.

What do I do when the child bites?

1. First, keep your own feelings in check. When a child bites, you might feel frustrated, infuriated, annoyed, embarrassed, and/or worried. All of these feelings are normal, but responding when you are in an intense emotional state is usually not a good idea. So calm yourself before you respond—count to 10, take a deep breath, or do whatever works for you.

2. In a firm, matter-of-fact voice (but not angry or yelling), say: No biting. Biting hurts. Comment on how the other child is feeling: Look, Madison is crying. She is crying because you bit her. Biting hurts. (Then stop!!!) **Keep it <u>short</u>, simple and clear.**

3. Next, shift your attention to the child who was bitten. Often when a child bites, adults pay a lot of attention to him or her. This is usually negative attention (telling them they shouldn't bite etc), but it is still very reinforcing and can actually cause the biting behaviour to continue, rather than stop. When you shift your focus and energy to the child who was bitten, you clearly communicate that biting does not result in more attention. Showing concern and sympathy for the child who was bitten also teaches empathy.

4. If the child who bit is verbal and able to talk about his/ her experiences, go back and talk with him/her about the different strategies he can use next time, instead of biting: If Tyler grabs your cuddly and won't let it go, you can say: "Tyler, that is my cuddly. Give it to me." If he won't give it back, you can come get me and I will help you. Or: When you want to play, you can say: "Will you play with me?" Then your friend knows you are ready to play.

5. Help the children move on. Ask: What would you like to play now? It might help to offer activities, like play-dough, drawing, or playing in sand or water, that allow them to release energy in constructive ways and can help them relax. The toddler who bit and the child who was hurt should not be made to play with one another, unless they want to.

Remember, learning a new behaviour takes time. The child may bite again, so continue watching closely. It also helps to use the same words every time you think the child is going to bite (No biting, biting hurts) as consistently as possible to emphasise the message.

When do I seek help for the child?

While biting is very common behaviour, it usually stops by age 3 years to 3 and a half years. If the toddler continues

to bite, or the number of bites increases instead of decreases over time, it is probably a good idea to request an assessment from a child development specialist. This professional can help you identify the reason for the biting and develop a strategy for addressing the behaviour. Remember, there is no quick fix. Over time, and with assistance, the child will stop biting and use more appropriate ways to express his/her needs.

What absolutely WILL NOT work to stop biting?

Shaming or harsh punishment do not reduce biting, but they do increase the child's fear and worry - which can actually increase biting incidents. Aggressive responses like these also do not teach your child the social skills s/he needs to cope with the situations that trigger biting.

Preventing joining in activities does not reduce biting, but does increase the child's anger, frustration - which can actually increase biting incidents. Supporting the child to engage in activities will help to distract them and relieve boredom and frustration.

Biting the child back, which some parents might suggest, is not a useful response. There is no research to show this behaviour reduces biting. However, it does teach the child that it's okay to bite people when you are upset! Keep in mind that human bites can be dangerous, and biting constitutes child abuse. This is not an appropriate response to toddler biting. (It is also obviously, a safeguarding issue!)

Further help

Ring or email Kellie Tye for further advice on specific issues. You may also seek advice from the behaviour management advisor in the local authority sometimes based in the SEND team.