

Tip Sheets

What to do When Children Bite

Many infants, toddlers, and young children bite. Understanding the function or reason for biting can provide families and the early care and education providers with important information about environmental or program changes needed to reduce and/or eliminate the behavior.

The goal is to support the child by providing guidance, teaching, and opportunities to practice new skills and strategies to appropriately communicate wants, needs, and feelings.

Why Children Bite

Some of the most common reasons for biting are:

- Power and Control
- Attention and Social Interaction
- Fear and self-defense
- Frustration and anger
- Imitation
- Response to major life change
- Exploration, oral stimulation, and teething

Power and Control

Children who lack choices and a sense of control over their world may use biting in order to gain some sense of power. The reactions of others to biting are often very powerful, thus providing a child with the needed feeling of being in control.

Attention and Social Interaction

Children need attention and affirmation to help them to feel validated and develop a sense of belonging. Biting is a powerful way to get attention

and to get it quickly. It can also be an attempt to initiate social interaction with a peer for a child who is not yet able to communicate “I want to play.”

Fear and Self-Defense

Biting can be used as a form of self-defense when a young child is feeling a sense of danger. The child establishes a “safety zone” through causing the individual to move away.

Frustration and Anger

Young children have “big” feelings that can be difficult to manage and express. A child who is extremely frustrated or angry may use biting to communicate these feelings when they have not yet developed the social and emotional skills to cope with their feelings in appropriate ways.

Imitation

Children learn through observation and imitation of what they experience in the world around them. An infant, toddler or preschooler may observe another child bite and decide to “try out” this behavior.

Response to a Major Life Change

Change can be stressful and confusing for young children and increase their anxiety. Biting might occur when a child is trying to cope with a major life change such as a new sibling or home or another change that impacts the child and family.

Exploration, Oral Stimulation, and Teething

Infants and young toddlers put almost everything in their mouths in order to learn about texture and taste, as well as experiment with cause and effect to learn “what will happen when I...”—and biting usually gets a “big” reaction. Some young children

also enjoy and seek out the physical oral sensations received from biting and chewing.

Teething often causes swollen gums and much discomfort for infants and toddlers. A natural response is to apply pressure to the gums by biting on something to help relieve some of the oral pain.

Prevention Strategies

Once you understand why your child is likely to bite, you can try to change situations in order to reduce, stop, and prevent biting by:

- Observing
- Distracting
- Communicating

Observe

Learn where, when, and in what situations biting occurs. Pay attention to signals. Stay close and step in if the child seems ready to bite.

Distract

Small children often forget they're angry or frustrated when they are redirected. Praise them for participating in new activities; suggest ways to express strong feelings; and help the children learn to communicate wants and needs.

Communicate

Help children learn to express feelings with appropriate words and actions. Reinforce positive behavior by acknowledging child's appropriate words and actions. Teach children words for setting limits, such as "stop," "mine," or "no."

Additional Biting Prevention Strategies

Behavior expectations should be age-appropriate and individually appropriate. Expecting children to

do something they are not able to do can cause stress, and stress can lead to biting.

- Provide opportunities for children to make choices and feel empowered.
- Offer foods with a variety of textures to meet children's sensory needs.

Strategies to Avoid

- Avoid labeling a child as a "biter." Labels can impact how you/others interact with a child.
- NEVER bite a child back! This sends a message that using violence is an acceptable behavior.
- Avoid getting angry, yelling, or shaming.
- Avoid giving too much attention to the child who bit. Even negative attention can reinforce a behavior.
- Avoid punishing a child. Punishment may teach a child "what not to do" but does not teach a child "what to do instead."

Additional Resources

Responding to Your Child's Bite

http://csefel.vanderbilt.edu/documents/biting-parenting_tool.pdf

Toddlers and Biting: Finding the Right Response

<https://www.zerotothree.org/resources/232-toddlers-and-biting-finding-the-right-response>

For more information, visit www.inclusivechildcare.org.

Copyright © 2024 Center for Inclusive Child Care

These materials may be freely reproduced for educational purposes. Information in this tip sheet has been modified from multiple sources.

Funding provided by the Minnesota Department of Children, Youth, and Families.