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Ideas and information about child development and early education for parents, professionals and the community-at-large.

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Dealing with Biting

Have you ever received a phone call from your child’s teacher notifying you that a child has bitten him or that your child has bitten? For many families, it is a very shocking and disturbing behavior and they want it to stop! The good news is that it is a normal stage most young children go through and will eventually grow out of it. In the meantime, there are many reasons why children bite and we must understand the reasons before we can take the first step in changing their behavior.

Teething - when children are teething, applying pressure to the gum area is very comforting to them, even if it means to bite another person. You can help them by providing cold teething rings, cold washcloths, etc.

Frustration - biting may occur when children encounter too little space, too many challenges/demands or just situations they can’t handle. Notice when a child is becoming frustrated and be ready to intervene by providing assistance and/or giving the child the words to express his or her feelings.

Experimental - when given a toy or other object, one of the first places that an infant/toddler puts it is in their mouth. Tasting, gnawing, and mouthing things are something that all children do. Many children bite and mouth simply to explore. When this occurs, we should communicate to them that it is not “OK” to bite people. “No, “ or “No bite,” would be an appropriate response. Also, offering them appropriate items to bite may help in this situation.

Stress - biting is one way toddlers assert themselves, express their feelings and relieve tension. At this age, they do not yet have the verbal or reasoning skills to negotiate or understand another person’s point of view. There are activities that will allow children to relieve tension in appropriate ways, such as pounding play dough, experiencing waterplay or exploring other sensory activities. Consistency in mealtimes, bedtimes, etc. will also help.

What should we do when biting occurs?

- Remain calm. Avoid a dramatic or negative response.
- Give immediate attention and comfort to the victim first. Clean the wound with soap and water.
- Create distance from the child who bit from the child that was bitten.
- Talk to the biting child. Point out the effect of biting.

What can we do to prevent biting?

- Chart the behavior of children who bite to get an idea of times and situations when biting occurs.
- Change the environment, routines, activities, etc. if necessary.
- Help children to communicate and verbalize feelings.
- Provide close supervision.
- Redirect children to more acceptable behaviors.
- Provide positive reinforcement for appropriate behavior.

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What should parents/families expect from their child's program?

- The children's safety should be first. Programs should provide first aid as well as comfort and support to any child who is bitten.
- Developmentally appropriate environment/activities for their children should be provided.
- Children who are biting for any reason should be taught more appropriate ways to channel their behavior.
- An incident report form should be completed.
- The appropriate family member of the child who was bitten and the biter should be notified, keeping the identities of all children confidential to avoid labeling or confrontations.
- Families should be provided with current information and resources on biting.
- Families should be informed of specific steps that are being taken to address biting and explain the reasoning behind those steps.

What are inappropriate actions to a biting child?

- Expelling or de-enrolling child from the program.
- Inappropriately moving child into older classrooms.
- Biting the child back.
- Making the child taste items that are sour or spicy.

Whether or not your child bites frequently or infrequently, you will want to work with your provider to determine the reason for biting and potential solutions. Consistency between home and the early childhood setting will help your child understand that biting is not an acceptable behavior. In most cases, biting decreases when family members and the provider react the same using the same behavior management techniques.

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