



Is Biting Normal Behavior for Young Children?

Biting can be a common behavior between the ages of fourteen and twenty-four months as well as for some older children. One of the most common reasons for biting is the frustration that children of this age feel when they are unable to use words. Toddler hood is a time of strong feelings and few words. This is a time of great change for children and the powerful feelings unleashed by these changes can sometimes lead to biting.

Children are more likely to bite at times when they are making important changes such as learning to use the toilet, moving to a big bed, or becoming a big brother or sister. All of these normal stresses can be expressed by biting. You can lessen the chance that children will use biting to express their feelings by letting them know that these changes are sometimes hard. You might say, "Are you missing your bottle?" or, "Are you missing your crib?" Talking about changes in the child's life gives the child a chance to express these natural feelings, rather than biting.

Another reason why biting is common at this age is that the toddlers use their mouths to learn about the world. Toddlers using their mouths to collect information may sometimes lead to biting.



Why Do Children Bite?



• Teething

Of course toddlers bite when they are teething. Help toddlers to cope with teething pain by making a variety of teething toys available. Ask the parent if there is a special teething toy from home that the child especially likes. You can pin a teething ring to a very short string attached to a child's shirt, or for older children give them a toy that can be kept in their pocket.

Some children are comforted by a frozen teething ring or frozen snacks. You can make a simple frozen teething ring from a clean baby washcloth by wetting it and putting it into the freezer. This can be safely chewed on by a toddler who has teething pain and will often numb the area providing some temporary relief.

• Hunger and Thirst

Toddlers sometimes bite simply because they are hungry and thirsty. Growing toddlers should not go more than two hours without food. One experienced toddler teacher says, "Snack is one of the most important parts of our day. My kids are hungry and this is the

longest they ever sit." Don't forget to also offer water regularly. Select crunchy and chewy snacks like pretzels, crackers, and bagels. The best time to do this is mid-morning. This can cut down on biting problems that tend to come up in the late morning. You might need to make snack time earlier to meet the needs of some children. If this is not possible offer cooking activities, and then allow children to taste the ingredients. This can help to satisfy hunger and can be fun and productive too.

- **Information Gathering**

It is natural for children to explore with their mouths. All toys for toddlers should be large enough not to be swallowed. You can make sure that they are a safe size by using a toilet paper roll. If the toy fits inside it is too small for a toddler. Show children which toys are best to chew on. Make teething toys available and once used put into a container for later cleaning.

- **Kissing**

Children sometimes bite when they want to kiss. Teach children ways for showing affection. How to kiss and give a hug can be taught. Help children to think about whether others like the kiss or hug, and insist that they listen to the words of a child who does not want to be kissed or touched

- **Seeking Attention or Testing Cause and Effect**

Children may bite to get attention. Biting causes a disturbance and focuses attention on the biter. Children may also be experimenting with cause and effect when they bite. They want to see what kind of reaction they will get and what will happen when they bit someone.



What can you do when biting happens?



The first thing to do is to comfort the bitten child. Being bitten is a very upsetting experience and most children need this comforting from an adult to feel that they will be safe in child care. Say to the biting child, "Biting hurts." Often children don't know that biting is painful to someone else. Use your tone of voice to say that this is serious and important. Then say to the child who has been bitten. "I think that must hurt. Let's go and wash it and put some ice on it."

You can also involve the biter in getting the ice for the child who was bitten. After washing the bite with soap and water, say, "Let's all go to get some ice." Let the biting child help to get the ice, making sure that you respect the bitten child's desire to not be touched by the biter. This gives the biting child a chance to make things better.



Teach the biting child new skills. Give the child some simple words like "stop" or "no" so that they can use words to help themselves feel safe instead of biting. Often biters feel scared both of the other children and of themselves.



Help get both children involved in calming activities. Book reading with an adult, playdough, sand, or water are very good activities to help children relax. This is why high quality child care programs have one or more of these activities available regularly.



Most biting runs its course in about a month or so. Use this as an opportunity to teach the biting child new ways of expressing herself. Put the child's feelings into words. You might say, "You want the toy. Since Jamie is not finished with it, why don't you ask, 'May I have it when you are finished?'" Or, help the child learn where to look to find a toy just like it. You might say, "Do you remember where we keep our cars? You may get one yourself." Teach words like, "my turn" or "stop" Make their words more powerful than biting by insisting that the children listen to each other. This basic assertiveness training can make children feel safer and can reduce biting.

Preventing Biting

Biting is a sign that a child needs your extra help to get through a rough time in their development. The best prevention is to shadow a child. This means sticking close by the child who is biting as much as you possibly can. Stay in arms reach during free play. If the child has bitten at around 3 o'clock make sure you stay close at that time of day. Just staying nearby helps children to feel safer and can reduce the possibility of a biting incident. This can be hard when you are busy meeting the needs of all the children in your care, but as much as you possibly can, stick close by the biter.

• Offer Appropriate Activities



It is not appropriate to ask toddlers to sit for large group activities like circle times. Most young toddlers are not ready to do this. Older toddlers can be involved but need short, highly active circle times. Allow informal small groups to happen naturally. For instance when one child asks for a book to be read, often others will gather on your lap too. You can also give toddlers appealing art materials and let them explore and experiment with them, getting to know what they can do with these things. Try lots of sensory activities like sand, water, and playdough. The goal with toddlers is to let them explore and enjoy. This reduces frustration and the chance that a toddler will express himself by biting.

• Create a Good Daily Schedule

Biting sometimes happens during the transitions from one activity to another. Reduce the number of transitions from one activity to another by increasing the length of free play time. Lower lights, use songs, and give a five minute warning to help make transitions calmer. Increase the amount of time the children spend outside if possible. This helps toddlers blow off steam and can reduce the number of biting problems.

- **Make Space for Biters**

How you set up your child care room can help you to handle biting problems. Often, children bite because they are crowded. Research has found more biting problems when toddlers are in a small child care room. It is easy to think that the younger the child the less room they need, but the opposite seems to be true. If you can't find a bigger space, try rearranging your furniture to reduce crowding. Create activity areas where all the toys used together can be kept together: a block area, a housekeeping area, an art area. Well organized spaces with toys that children can get for themselves from low open shelves reduces frustration and improves many behavior problems including biting.

Sometimes toddlers bite because they feel overwhelmed by too much noise, too much light, and too many people. Create a private space in your child care room. The best private spaces are places where children can play by themselves but where you can supervise safely. A playhouse made out of a large cardboard box with cushions inside or a space between a shelf and a wall can be made into a place for children to play quietly on their own.

- **Provide Duplicate Toys**

Another reason why children bite is because they want to play with something that someone else is using. One way to cut down on this problem is to have duplicates of toys that are most popular. One experienced toddler teacher keeps four trains in her room. This lets children who are interested all play with the same toys, learning from watching each other. This type of playing side-by-side is called parallel play and is common for toddlers. Having duplicate toys does not need to be expensive. Try garage sales, thrift stores, and better still, ask for donations from parents.



- **Provide Positive Ways for Children to Seek Attention**



Sometimes children who bite discover that they can get a big reaction from the bitten child and the adults. Toddlers love to explore cause and effect. You can help children experiment with cause and effect in a positive way. Make pop up toys available for toddlers. These toys let children see how they have made something happen. You can also say things to help toddlers enjoy their growing abilities. When a toddler knocks a tower of blocks over, you might say, "You made a big

crash." The more that you can help children to see that they can make a big splash in a fun and positive way the less they will need to use biting to get a reaction.

Playing Detective about Biting

Finding out why a child is biting will make it possible to find a solution and prevent the behavior from happening again. Since biting can have many causes you will need to play detective to find out the causes for each child and then try the best solutions for that situation.

Gather specific information about the incident:

What time of day did the child bite?

During what activity did the biting take place or was it between activities?

Solution: Shadow the child and give warnings before transitions.

Do you think the child was hungry?

Solution: Think about changing snacktime and offer crunchy foods.

Do you think the child was thirsty?

Solution: Offer water frequently.

Do you think the child was angry?

Solution: Help child learn words to use when angry.

Do you think the child was feeling frustrated?

Solution: Help child learn words to use when frustrated.

Was the child fighting over a popular toy?

Solution: Offer duplicates of popular toys.

Do you think the child was feeling overcrowded or overwhelmed?

Solution: Make a private space, rearrange space.

Is the child facing important changes, toilet learning, moving to big bed, family stress, new baby in the family?

Solution: Talk about these changes with the child, put feelings into words.

Do you think the child is teething?

Solution: Offer teething toys and frozen snacks.

Was the child trying to kiss someone?

Solution: Teach gentle kissing and hugging.

Was the child seeking attention?

Solution: Provide opportunities for the child to receive positive attention.

Was the child testing for cause and effect?

Solution: Provide toys and situations where the child can test cause and effect without hurting others

Talking with the Families about Biting



Talk with the parent(s) of the child who bit and ask if they are seeing any biting at home. Often parents are surprised and upset and may have never seen their child bite. Reassure the parents that this is a typical behavior for young children and share with them what you are planning to do in child care to prevent this from happening again. If the child is biting at home, then you can suggest that you and the parent use the same approaches. Consistency between home and child care will help children to learn the appropriate ways to behave.

The parents of the other children often want to know who is doing the biting. The responsibility of the child care provider is to keep this information confidential. Reassure parents that you are doing what you can to help the biter learn new behaviors and to keep all the children safe in your care.

Summary

Biting is a common behavior for children between the ages of fourteen and twenty-four months. Since there are many possible causes of biting, the caregiver must play detective to figure out the reasons for the biting. Each situation has its own cause, and an effective solution will depend on that cause. Child care providers can do many things to minimize the possibility of biting.

Assignments

1. List three common reasons children bite.
2. Describe a biting incident you have seen or experienced. Using the list above in the "Playing Detective" section, determine the cause(s) and solution(s) for the biting incident you have described.
3. What are three things can you do in your child care room to prevent a biting incident?
4. Children who bite can benefit from learning to use words when they are upset. Give three examples where you could prevent a biting situation by helping a toddler in your care learn how to use words. Describe the situation and what you could say to the child