

Early Years Are Learning Years What to Do About Biters

Although biting isn't "abnormal" in the sense that one out of ten toddlers and two-year-olds does it, it is a disturbing and potentially harmful behavior that parents and caregivers must discourage from the start. Understanding why young children bite can help you deter this aggressive behavior and teach them positive ways to handle their feelings. Identifying the kind of biter you're dealing with will help you develop an appropriate response.

The experimental biter. An infant or young child may take an experimental bite out of a mother's breast or a caregiver's shoulder. When this occurs, adults should use prompt, clear signals to communicate that children must not bite people. "No," said sharply, would be an appropriate response.

These children may simply want to touch, smell and taste other people in order to learn more about their world. Their muscles are developing, and they need to experiment. Provide them with a variety of surfaces to play on and a colorful selection of toys during this stage. This type of biter may also have teething pain, and need appropriate things to chew: frozen bagels; very cold, large carrots; teething biscuits; or a safe teething ring.

The frustrated biter. Some biters lack the skills to cope with situations such as the desire for an adult's attention or another child's toy. Even though the child may not have intended to harm another person, adults must react with disapproval. First, tend to the victim immediately. Then explain to the biter that biting hurts others and is not allowed.

You may help frustrated biters by teaching them appropriate language to show their feelings or get what they need. Give positive reinforcement when children communicate effectively. Also, watch for signs of rising frustration, so you can prevent an incident.

The threatened biter. Some children bite in self-defense. They may be overwhelmed by their surroundings, and bite to regain control. They may feel threatened by situations such as newly separated parents, the death of a grandparent, or a mother returning to the work force. In this case, use the intervention techniques already mentioned, and assure the child that his rights and possessions are safe.

Families and caregivers must cooperate to prevent biting. Working together, educators and parents may identify reasons for a child's biting and respond accordingly. While early childhood professionals may be more familiar with positive discipline techniques, parents are experts on their own children's behavior. Look for patterns in the biter's environment and emotional state at each episode. Does he always bite the same individual? Is she simply exhausted, or hungry?

Teaching children age-appropriate ways to control themselves encourages the development of confidence and self-esteem. We can guide children towards self-control and away from biting. The key is understanding -- for adults and children alike.