

Biting Must Never Be Permitted

We teach children not to hurt others. Youngsters must therefore learn that hitting, slapping, pinching, scratching, biting, shoving, knocking down and hair pulling are totally unacceptable. Of all these childhood behaviors, however, biting seems to cause parents the most problems. Horrified teachers and day care providers occasionally overreact and harshly punish the biter, the parents of the biter are embarrassed by the incident and the parents of the victim are upset that their child has been hurt.

Yet biting is very common. Studies have shown that over half of all toddlers in day care have been bitten more than once. Boys are more likely to bite than girls and the behavior is more common when parents use physical punishment for discipline. Children usually bite to obtain objects, gain attention or express frustration. It is a very powerful way of being noticed!

Biting usually starts at the time teeth erupt and is usually a chance discovery while teething. Initially, some parents think it is cute and the child considers it a game to gain attention. Breast-fed infants generally learn very quickly not to bite, probably because of mother's pain and the prompt removal of the infant from the breast.

During the toddler stage of child development, biting becomes a form of communication. The youngster wants to be independent but lacks the necessary verbal skills. Temper tantrums then develop as a way of expression and biting becomes nothing more than a severe tantrum. When a toddler wants instant attention, biting certainly will work. In children over 3 years of age, biting occurs only in extreme circumstances when, for example, a child is losing a fight or thinks their survival is threatened.

The child who bites needs to be closely watched by the parents or day care provider so the biting can be quickly interrupted. A parent's response to biting should leave no question that they mean business. First, look the child straight in the eye and in a loud, sharp voice say "No biting. We never bite people" It is okay to startle the child who bites. This is not a time for child psychology and long discussions, such as "I know you are mad, but biting hurts and could cause an infection or scarring." Avoid giving the child something else to bite instead, such as a towel or a stuffed animal. The message should be clear: biting is bad. Lengthy conversations only gain biters the attention they sought. Then, the child should be immediately placed in "time out" for one minute per year of age. Make sure the youngster receives no eye contact or interaction while in timeout. Sympathizing with the victim is also helpful and may serve to avoid secondary gain for the biter.

Never ever bite the child back - it serves absolutely no disciplinary purpose. Biting is an immature act and parents are supposed to set an example! Furthermore, biting a child only elicits fear and anger in the youngster, and usually makes the adults feel so guilty that the effectiveness of the discipline is diminished. Similarly, do not wash their mouth out with soap, pinch their cheek, or slap their mouth. Physical punishment only makes biting worse.

The best time to stop biting is when it first starts. Make sure siblings do not laugh when a younger brother or sister bites another child. Parents should never treat biting as a game. Eliminate little "love bites" when playing with children since youngsters can not distinguish them from painful biting. In addition, try defusing potential biting situations before trouble occurs by learning the youngster's cues. For example, when toddlers are tired, hungry, frustrated or overexcited, they are more likely to be aggressive. If it looks as though a child might bite, send them off to "timeout" before a victim is hurt.

When biting occurs in day care, initiate a meeting with the day care staff to help defuse any crisis. The parents of the child who has been bitten usually want the biter removed from day care or prevented from playing with their child. Learn exactly how the incidents are being handled and make sure there is a consistent plan for managing the biting. This should not include taking the child home, if possible. Move the child to a smaller, more closely supervised setting with fewer aggressive children. Finding a day care whose staff is better able to deal with biting may also be helpful.

Fortunately, once a child's verbal skills improve, biting usually disappears. The youngster can now express their feelings by talking and the child no longer needs to bite in order to gain attention, express anger or show frustration. The child's physician should be contacted if a child with good verbal skills who is over 3 years of age continues to bite.

Remember, biting is an unacceptable behavior. It will quickly make any child and his or her parents very unpopular, and the act should therefore be removed from the youngster's repertoire the moment it starts.