

GROWING IDEAS

OUCH! That hurts! – Biting

Why do some children bite?

Children bite for a variety of reasons. For some children, biting may be related to their stage of development. Biting can be very common, for example, at the toddler stage of development. When young children lack skills and strategies to communicate their feelings and needs effectively, they may feel overwhelmed. Biting then becomes a child's way of expressing frustration.



Young children are telling us what is happening to them as they grow.

- Infants may be telling us that their mouths hurt from teething.
- Toddlers may be telling us that they need to be in a space that encourages them to move around, explore, and learn about their environment.
- Preschoolers may be telling us that they have seen or experienced biting and want to try it out.

Biting can occur as a result of environmental conditions:

- Crowded, noisy, bright, or overstimulating environments may confuse or overexcite young children.
- Child/adult ratios that do not allow for close supervision can be unsafe and stressful.
- Learning materials, activities, and adult expectations that do not match children's abilities, learning style or temperament may frustrate young children.
- Changes in the environment or routines that are not sensitive to young children's needs can be upsetting.
- Schedules that do not match children's needs may cause anxiety or boredom.

What is a child trying to tell us through biting?

Biting behavior can provide clues to how children are feeling and what they need from their environment to be successful. Powerful emotions are difficult for young children to manage and express. These emotions may include:

- Anger
- Frustration
- Excitement
- Fear
- Anxiety

Preventing and responding to biting behavior:

When educators and parents understand what children are trying to tell them, they increase the chances of preventing and appropriately responding to biting behavior.

- Provide teething toys to relieve teething pains.
- Provide opportunities to move and explore independently, and to make choices.
- Allow a child to eat when hungry, sleep when tired, sit on your lap, or have enough time to finish an activity.
- Acknowledge children's frustration and give them the words to express their feelings: "You're angry because you want the truck."
- Model the appropriate words to ask for something: "Ask Camden, 'May I use the truck?'"
- Provide consistent, nurturing relationships with responsive adults.
- Recognize when children are unable to manage a situation on their own and intervene in a calm and caring manner.

Create environments that match children's individual developmental needs and interests by:

- Arranging the space to fit the activity and group size.
- Creating quiet or alone space for rest and relaxation.
- Offering activities that include movement and offer sensory experiences (sand, water, etc.).
- Providing a daily schedule and routine that is consistent but flexible.
- Limiting the number of transitions and providing cues and supports to prepare children for changes.
- Purchasing multiples of favorite toys to reduce frustration.

Where to learn more:

Heinlen, M. (2003). *Teeth are not for Biting*. Minneapolis, MN: Free Spirit Publishing.

Katz, K. (2002). *No Biting*. New York, NY: Grosset and Dunlap.

Kinnell, G. (2002). *No Biting: Policy and Practice for Toddler Programs*. St. Paul, MN: Redleaf Press.

Milnes, S. (n.d.). "Playing Detective about Biting." *Web-based Learning Units*. Retrieved October 6, 2004 from <http://betterkidcare.psu.edu/AngelUnits/OneHour/Biting/BitingLesson.html>

"Biters: Why They Do It and What to Do About It." (n.d.). *Early Years are Learning Years*. Retrieved October 6, 2004 from <http://www.naeyc.org/resources/eyly/1996/08.htm>

See also *Growing Ideas Toolkit* tip sheets: "Behavior Communicates;" "Friends and Feelings;" and "Building Belonging."

Biting behavior is stressful to adults too. Educators can support families by:

- Providing information about child development.
- Sharing a copy of this tip sheet.
- Validating concerns.
- Discussing and modeling methods for preventing and responding to biting behavior.
- Working together on a consistent approach.



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Revised: 07/27/2006