

## **BITING AND YOUR CHILD**

**David Lowenstein, Ph.D.**

- Although biting isn't "abnormal" in the sense that one out of ten toddler and 2 year olds does it, it is disturbing and potentially harmful behavior that parents and educators must discourage from the first episode
- Understanding why young children bite can help you deter this aggressive behavior and teach them positive ways to handle their feelings
- Most children first learn to bite by doing it to their parents playfully, it is very important to interrupt this primitive behavior at an early stage
- Biting is usually a chance discovery around 1 year of age, which is a time when teething and mouthing are normal behaviors. Often it continues because parents initially think biting is cute, and the child considers it a type of game to get attention.
- Later children may use it when they are frustrated and want something from another child. At this age, when children have minimal verbal skills, biting becomes a primitive form of communication. Only after age 2 or 3 does it become a deliberate way to express anger and intimidate others.
- **IDENTIFYING THE KIND OF BITER:**
  1. **The Experimental Biter:** A child or infant may take an experimental bite out of a mother's breast or caregiver's shoulder. Adults should use prompt, clear signals to communicate that children must not bite people. "NO" said sharply is the best response
    - These biters may simply want to touch, smell and taste other people to learn about their world, their muscles are developing and they want and need to experiment. Provide them with a variety of surfaces to play on and colorful selection of toys to stimulate exploration
  2. **The Frustrated Biter:** These children 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
    - 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, spotting potential conflict may help you intercept a potentially harmful incident.

3. **The Threatened Biter:** some children when they feel they are endangered, bite in self-defense. They may be overwhelmed by their surroundings, and bite as a means of regaining control. Assure your child that his rights and possessions are safe
    - Children sometimes become threatened by situations such as newly separated parents, death of grandparent, or mother returning to work force. The bond between the child and caregiver should be as warm and reassuring as possible
  4. **The Power Biter:** Some children experience a strong need for autonomy and control, as soon as they get the response they get from biting, the behavior is strongly reinforced
    - Give the biter better choices throughout the day and reinforce positive social behaviors (like sharing and saying thank you). If the biter gets attention when he/she is not biting, they may not have to resort to aggressive behaviors to feel a sense of personal power.
- **STEPS TO STOP BITING:**
    1. **Establish a Rule: “WE NEVER BITE PEOPLE”**
      - Give your child a reasons for the rule, biting hurts, or can lead to infection and scarring
    2. **Suggest a Safe Alternative**
      - Tell your child that if he wants something, he should come to you and ask for help or point to it, rather than biting the person who has it.
      - If he bites when he is angry, you should say “If you are mad, come to me and tell me.”
      - If your child is at the chewing everything stage (18 months or less), help him choose a toy he can bite rather than telling him he cannot bite anything. A firm toy or teething ring will do, and encourage them to carry this “chewy” with them for a few days.
    3. **Interrupt Biting with a Sharp “NO”**
      - Be sure to use an unfriendly voice and look them straight in the eye
      - Try to interrupt them when they look like they might bite someone but before they do it
      - Extra close supervision may be necessary until the biting has stopped
    4. **Give Your Child a Time-Out if He Bites Others**
      - Send child to a boring place for approximately 1 minute per year of age
      - If your child attempts to bite you while you are holding them `say, NO and put them down immediately and walk away
      - If time-out does not work, take away a favorite toy for the remainder of the day

5. **Never Bite Your Child for Biting Someone Else**

- Biting back will make your child upset that you hurt them and may teach them that it is OK to bite if you are bigger
- Do Not wash the mouth out with soap, pinch the cheek or slap the mouth, avoid physical punishment in general
- Eliminate “Love Bites” since your child will be unable to distinguish them from painful biting

6. **Praise Your Child for Not Biting**

- The important times to praise them are when they are in situations with children that they used to bite frequently
- Give reminders just prior to these high risk visits and praise them afterwards for good behavior

7. **Prevention**

- The best time to stop a biting behavior from becoming a habit is when it first starts
- Be sure no one laughs when they bite and that no one treats it like a game
- Never give in to your child demands because of biting
- Since biting commonly occurs in child-care setting, be sure the providers understand your approach and are willing to apply it