

Ouch! Understanding Our Role in Preventing Biting Behaviors

Every behavior is a form of communication. Biting is a behavior that *teaches* us to look at what the child might be trying to say. If we can understand the function of the behavior (why the child is biting and what he is trying to communicate) then we can develop a plan to reduce the behavior.

Temperament: Does the child's temperament play a role in her use of the behavior? For information on behavior and temperament, visit www.zerotothree.org.

Environment: Does the environment impact biting behaviors? Are there enough materials? Are there duplicates of preferred toys? Is space limited? Is it too stimulating? Is it too sterile? Is there a consistent and predictable routine? Does the biting occur more often in certain settings or during particular activities? Have there been any changes in the home or school environment?

Attention: Is the child trying to get or avoid the attention of an adult or another child? Does the child have the skills or the ability to get/avoid attention in other ways?

Communication: Is this the most effective form of communication? Is this how the child greets other children or adults? Expresses affection? Protests? Does the child have the ability to use language to express needs and wants? Do others respond appropriately to his verbal or non-verbal requests?

Hungry, thirsty: Are basic needs a factor? Is the child hungry? Does the behavior occur before lunch or snack time? Is the child thirsty?

Expressing strong feelings: Is the child feeling angry? Lonely? Frustrated? Excited? Does she know other ways to express her feelings?

Sleepy/Sick: Is the child tired? Is it more likely to happen early in the morning and before naptime? Is this a persistent behavior or could she be feeling ill or uncomfortable? Is she teething?

Other factors to consider:

Children pay close attention to the language of adults. When adults

- discuss biting in front of children
- refer to the child as "the biter"
- repeatedly use the "bite" word (or use it several times during a response to a bite)
- read and reread "Biting Books"

then the word "bite" floods the environment. Overuse of the word "bite" can reinforce or encourage biting in very young children. For example, if the adult says "No Bite! Biting hurts! You bit Jenny. No Biting!" then the child's action was reinforced four times. Instead the adult could say "Stop! That hurts."

Young children are "hands-on" learners who explore by doing, touching, and feeling. They have more sensory receptors in their mouths than in their finger tips. For some children, biting behaviors are reduced when they have access to teethers, pacifiers, or sippee cups.

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Strategies

In order to prevent children from biting others, we need to develop strategies based on why the biting is occurring.

Temperament

If a child's temperament is a factor, then the adults need to look at what can be done to support this child's temperament. For example, if a child is anxious in new situations then the adult might need to provide extra support if there is going to be a change in the routine. If a child is highly persistent, the adult can look for opportunities for persistence to be a strength and give extra support in situations where persistence could create a problem.

Environment

If the environment is a factor, then the adults need to change the environment to encourage more positive behaviors. For example, provide support in situations/settings that have the potential to be challenging. If a child bites peers during clean up time, involve the child in helping the adult with a clean up project such as wiping the table or working on a specific task. If the environment is too stimulating, adults might need to turn down lights, reduce noise level, separate into smaller groups, or create a designated calm space.

Attention

If a child seems to be biting to gain attention, adults can teach a child to get attention in other ways. Adults need to be aware of and responsive to other ways that a child may be communicating a need for attention. If adults react to a bite with strong emotions and loud expressions, then the biting might increase. Adults also need to be sensitive to a young child's need to explore and develop his sense of himself. Children should have daily opportunities to express their own ideas and experience positive connections with others. If a child is biting to avoid attention, adults need to protect a child's need for space.

Communication

If biting is a child's most effective form of communication, adults need to teach other effective ways to communicate. Examples can include saying or signing "No!" "Stop!" "Help!". Adults need to be responsive to children's verbal *and* non-verbal forms of communication. Sometimes a child might bite a child as a form of greeting. In this case, that adult needs to teach the child other ways to say hello.

Hunger/Thirst

Sometimes, basic needs play a factor in a child's use of biting behaviors. Modifications can be made to the routine. Children should have access to drinking water throughout the day.

Experiencing Strong Emotions

Young children need help learning to identify and appropriately express strong feelings. Adults can help by labeling and validating feelings. For example: "You are so mad." "I am disappointed that it is raining." "She smiled when you brought her the blankie." Adults need to reinforce the impact of children's helpful and positive behaviors.

Sleepy/Sick

If a child is teething, he might be in a lot of pain. Providing teethingers can help. Naptimes might need to be adjusted if a child seems to be biting when tired.