



No Easy Solution: Toddlers and Biting

by Julie Renaud

Why Do Children Bite?

A younger child may bite as a part of his natural exploration of the world around him. Everything he wants to know more about (clothing, toys, hands) goes into his mouth. As his teeth come in he may accidentally bite down while nursing or nip your shoulder when being held. At this point you just need to tell him "no" firmly. He may also be teething. Biting down on something solid relieves the pain. If this is the case, offer him something more appropriate to bite down on such as a teething ring or a cold, wet washcloth.

But as children become toddlers (12 –24 months) the reasons for biting change. Toddlers are in a new and exciting world. They have new activities and a different schedule. They can do more than ever and are eager to try it all. But this new world also offers constant challenges. Challenges they may not be ready to handle. They may respond with biting because they have not yet learned the words or the social skills they need.

Toddlers do not have enough language to express all of their needs. As they interact with the other children, they don't yet know how to ask for what they want or say no to someone who wants what they have. These are new ways of using language. It is not enough to just encourage children to use words, parents and providers need to give them the right words. Teach them very specific phrases to use when they need them. "I want _____," "No, I have that now."

Toddlers also lack the social skills needed to cope with stressful situations. As adults, when we are under stress we have learned how to say what we want calmly rather than yelling, recognize when we are about to snap because of stress and when it's best to walk away. Toddlers experience stress just as adults do, but they haven't yet learned how to manage it. When they are under stress they may resort to their most basic communication methods to make their feelings known – crying, hitting, biting.

High stress times for toddlers include major life changes such as divorce, a new sibling or starting at a new child care program. But smaller events are also very stressful for toddlers. Transitioning from one activity to another, waiting, sharing and taking turns can all be stressful. And being hungry or tired can lower their tolerance for frustration during stressful events.

What Can You Do?

Look for child care programs that prevent biting by offering enough duplicate toys for everyone, reducing the need to fight over toys. In many programs, children are allowed into the different play areas in small groups. If providers know that they typically send four children to the dramatic play center and the broom is a popular item, look for four brooms. If everyone likes the hats, there should be enough hats in the dress up basket. Anticipating and avoiding potentially

frustrating situations that can lead to biting is a key strategy in the prevention of biting in the classroom.

Look for programs that have low child to adult ratios. Having enough staff is another important prevention strategy. In programs with higher ratios ask if they can provide extra staff during high stress times such as late morning and late afternoon when children are hungry and tired. If biting is a problem in your toddler's group and adding extra staff is impossible, perhaps you and other parents can volunteer to come in at high stress times until the problem is under control.

If your child is involved – either doing the biting or being bitten – work with the staff to solve the problem. Set a time to talk with all of the staff that are involved with your child during the day. Your discussions should be kept confidential and your meetings with the providers should be separate from those of the others parents. Biting is a very emotional issue and parents may feel angry and frightened. Directing that anger towards other parents will not help to solve the problem.

If your child is doing the biting, discuss his home behavior with the child care staff. Does he bite at home? Who does he bite? When and how often? Under what circumstances? It may be helpful to keep a record to see if particular situations and times of the day trigger a biting incident. Once the triggers have been identified, the adults can work together to change the environment and avoid those situations while teaching the child new skills.

The reaction of the adults should be discussed. How do you, his parents, respond when biting happens? How is the child care staff responding? It is important that the family and the providers respond in a similar manner to help the child learn not to bite. Prevention is the best approach. Parents and providers can prevent biting by being aware of what causes stress in toddlers and helping them cope with the high stress times. Avoid creating situations that ask your toddler to use his budding social skills when he is tired or hungry. Don't expect him to be able to take turns and share easily at this age. This is the beginning of the learning process. He won't be good at it for quite sometime. If you see your toddler getting overly frustrated and stressed, step in and help him get what he needs using acceptable words and actions. Use it as a teaching moment rather than a punishing moment. Never encourage the victim to bite back or bite the child yourself! Never hit or spank a child for biting. You are trying to teach the child that violence is not an acceptable way to handle difficult situations. Do not contradict your words with your actions.

When children bite, the adults who care about them must respond quickly, and together, to help the child through this developmental stage. Biting is a perfectly normal behavior but it is also an alienating behavior. Your toddler needs help learning appropriate social behaviors. As a parent, your goal is to take your child from a helpless infant to a caring adult. You held your child's hand as he learned to walk. Now you are helping him master his first step in learning how to get along in the world.