

PARENTS' GUIDE TO BEHAVIOR PROBLEMS

The child who bites

By Barton D. Schmitt, MD

THE PROBLEM

Biting another child is one of the more unacceptable aggressive behaviors children may engage in. The parent of the child who has been bitten is usually very upset and worried about the risk of infection. If biting occurs in a child-care setting, the parents of the other children may want the biter expelled. If it happens in another child's home, the biter often is told never to return. Most children first learn to bite by doing it to their parents in a playful manner. It is very important to interrupt this primitive behavior at an early stage.

Biting is usually a chance discovery around 1 year of age, at a time when teething and mouthing are normal behaviors. It often continues because the parents initially think it is cute, and the child considers it a game to get attention. Later, around 2 or 3 years, children may bite when they are frustrated or want something from another child. At this age, when children have minimal verbal skills, biting becomes a primitive form of communication. Only after 2 or 3 years of age can it become a deliberate way to express anger and intimidate others.

THE SOLUTION

Establish a rule that "We never bite people." Give your child a reason for the rule, namely that biting hurts. Other reasons, which won't interest him, are that bites can lead to infection or scarring. Although your child may not fully understand the reason for the rule until around 3 years of age, he can understand the consequences of breaking it at any age beyond 8 to 12 months.

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Interrupt biting with a sharp "No." Be sure to use an unfriendly voice, and look your child straight in the eye. Try to interrupt her when she looks as if she might bite somebody, before she actually does it. Extra close supervision may be necessary until the biting stops.

Never laugh when your child bites, and never treat it like a game. Make sure older siblings follow your lead. Remember that the best time to stop biting from becoming a habit is when it first starts. Also, never give in to your child's demands because he bites. Since it is not unusual for biting to occur in child-care settings, be sure the providers understand your approach and are willing to apply it.

Suggest a safe alternative behavior. Tell your child that if she wants something she should come to you and ask for help or point to what she wants, rather than biting the person who has it. If she bites when

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she is angry, tell her, "When you are angry, come and tell me." If your child is at the stage when she chews everything (usually less than 18 months of age), help her choose a toy that she can bite rather than telling her she may not bite anything. A firm toy or teething ring will do. Encourage her to carry her "chewy" with her for a few days.

Give your child a time-out for biting others. Send him to a boring place for approximately one minute for each year of his age. If he attempts to bite you while you are holding him, say "No." Always put him down immediately, and walk away (a form of time-out). If time-out does not work, take away a favorite toy for the remainder of the day.

Never bite back. Biting back will make your child upset that you hurt her and may teach her that it is OK to bite if you are bigger. Also, do not wash out her mouth with soap, pinch her cheek, or slap her mouth. In fact, if your child tends to be aggressive, avoid all physical punishment, such as spanking. Also avoid "love bites," since your child will not be able to distinguish them from painful biting.

Praise your child for not biting. The most important time to praise him is in settings or with particular children when he used to bite often. Initially, give him a kind reminder about biting just prior to these high-risk encounters. Then praise him afterward for good behavior.

Call our office immediately if:

- Biting causes a puncture or cut that completely breaks the skin. The wound may need treatment.

Call our office during regular hours if:

- Biting persists for more than four weeks after you adopt this approach.
- Your child bites or otherwise does harm to himself intentionally.
- Your child has several other behavioral problems.
- You have other questions or concerns.

Adapted from Schmitt BD: *Your Child's Health*. New York, Bantam Books, Inc., 1987.

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