

UNDERSTANDING CHILDREN WHO BITE

There has been a lot of research in the area of children biting other children. It is something that usually happens, if it does at all, during toddlerhood.

It is nearly always to do with an area of the child's life which he/she finds frustrating or unsettling. Therefore, it's really important to know toddlerhood brings about strong feelings for children, at a time when reasoning and calming oneself is a very difficult thing to do.

We know that children are more likely to bite at times when they are experiencing or making important changes in their young life. An event such as learning to use the toilet, moving from a cot to a big bed, or becoming a big brother or sister can create stresses for the child. And all of these normal stresses can be expressed by biting.

Frustration is the outcome of a situation the child cannot yet understand or cope with. Perhaps the child is anxious or feels vulnerable because of a new baby brother or sister. We need to remember that to gain attention, even if it's for something bad, becomes a positive for a child feeling this way.

Also, biting can give the child a sense of control in a situation that threatens what they are used to, or at a time when sharing an item or person is not acceptable to them. Sometimes, for example when circumstances change at home, children try to create a safety zone around them. If you look at it from their point of view, when you bite, your intended victim (and perhaps the thing that is frustrating you) moves away. Therefore, the end result is what is wanted.

As a parent, knowing that there are 'trigger' events which not all children see as exciting or happy, will help you cope with this stage of your child's life. Please remember that it is a stage. It is very rare that it will go on beyond these early years.

HELPING THE CHILD COPE

There are some things we can do to lessen the chance that children will use biting to express their feelings.

If there is a big event happening in their lives, let them know that these changes are sometimes difficult to manage. There are simple ways of expressing these difficulties for them, ones which they may not realise are linked to their behaviour.

You might say, "Are you missing your bottle?" or, "Are you missing your cot?" Talking about changes in the child's life gives the child a chance to express these natural feelings, rather than biting.

REASONS:- it's often useful to see biting as a form of communicating, whatever they are trying to tell us. Here's a list of some of the reasons for biting:-

- Teething
- Experimenting
- Control
- Defending
- Expressing feelings, even love: biting when they want to kiss.
- Hunger or thirst (try chewy and cruchy snacks)
- Over-excited
- Anxious or threatened
- Frustration, irritation
- No words to communicate the situation yet

GETTING TO KNOW BITING THROUGH OBSERVATION

You can do a check-list, or keep a diary as to when your child bites. You may then see a pattern forming. At home, does it happen at feeding time for a sibling; is your child anxious about being successful in the potty?

At nursery, we will keep notes too, on our observation forms. We can see if it happens when, for example, your child is in large groups. If so, we can plan for this happening by placing a member of staff your child trusts at the head of the group, with him/her, prepared and vigilant for trigger situations.

At home and at nursery, we can look for a pattern together. Is it at a similar time of day, when he/she is getting hungry or tired? We can also note how intense the trigger situation is. Once we can see a pattern at home and/or at nursery, we can plan to take him/her away from a situation that is brewing BEFORE it happens.

We always recommend that you react with speed when you see the situation building and divert your child's attention.

SOLUTIONS AND CONVERSATIONS

We always emphasise that you must teach the alternative to biting when things are calm again.

- If the child has reacted to a situation defensively, teach him/her to use a hand held up to say 'stop'*
- If the child is expressing love, teach them to hug instead. Make it a game. Who can give the biggest hugs?
- If the child is angry, teach him/her to come and find you
- If the child is biting for attention, explain fully once that it is wrong. When the situation is repeated, then say 'no' only and remove him/her from the situation, giving all your attention to the victim

*Often the biter is scared of other children or themselves. Teach them words if they do not want another child to come closer, like 'stop' or 'no'. This helps them to feel safe.

- 1) Make sure your message is clear after a bite: "No. Biting hurts"
- 2) Give the bitten child the attention: 'That must hurt, let's get it cleaned up and put a cold-pack on it'.

We also suggest that you avoid the negative and the word "don't" during conversations with your child.

These are some useful sentences to try out:-

"We keep our mouths to ourselves and then we stay healthy"

"Jennie wants to be your friend. What will you play together?"

SETTING UP YOUR HOME TO HELP

There are some really useful activities for a biting child. Go for sensory ones (using the 5 senses) as much as possible.

For example, have your child playing with water, or in sand, or with play-dough. Plan for plenty of time outside and avoid long periods of inactivity when the child could get frustrated.

Reduce frustrating situations wherever possible. Remember, if you need to change the activity, warn your child with plenty of time (at least 5 minutes) that the present situation is going to change.

Think about whether your child is a bit overwhelmed. If so, you could make sure toys are at hand and that you don't crowd his/her space. Have a good look at the rooms he/she uses. Is there too much light or noise?

It's a great thing to give a private space to a child, a safe place where he or she can play on his own whilst you are near. Some good ideas are setting up a big cardboard box with cushions in it, or creating a safe space between a wall and set of shelves.

And it's good to be positive! Cause and effect toys are very helpful for a positive fun reaction from your child, which can be mood-changing in itself and stop further telling-offs from biting. For example: try out pop-up toys; building towers and knocking them down with a 'crash' noise, happily saying "you made a big crash". Suddenly, you have a new situation to explore together.

Remember, it may take some time. Anxiety may keep the child from making progress. So, always use praise when you can and explain the praise e.g. "how nicely you are playing with your baby brother. That looks great fun!" or "What a great tower you've built, how did you do that?"

At all times, be consistent, be clear and be persistent. It may be tiring, but it will teach your child some great coping mechanisms for later in life. Your child needs your loving concentration at this time and the phase will pass.