

Tip Sheets

Why Children Bite: Infants and Toddlers



Biting is a common occurrence in an early care and education setting. And for a child under 3 years of age, biting

is often developmental in nature and related to the child's current stage of development.

The first step in reducing and eliminating biting behavior is to gain an understanding of why a child is biting. There are a number of reasons that infants and toddlers bite:

Exploration and Experimentation

The mouth is one of the most developed parts of an infant's body and is used to explore and learn about the world. Infants and young toddlers put almost everything in their mouths in order to learn about texture and taste.

Infants and toddlers also explore and experiment with cause and effect to learn "what will happen when I..." and biting usually gets a "big" reaction from others.

Teething

Teething often causes swollen gums and much discomfort for the infant or toddler. A natural response to oral pain is to apply pressure to the gums by biting on something. This helps

to relieve some of the pain. Occasionally what might be bitten is another person.

Oral Stimulation

Some young children enjoy and seek out the physical oral sensations that received from biting and chewing.

Frustration

Young children have "big" feelings that can be difficult to manage and express. Infants and toddlers have only been in the world for a short time and have not yet developed the social and emotional skills to cope with their feelings in appropriate ways. They also lack the language skills to communicate such frustrations as "I don't like that," "mine" and "you are in my space."

Seeking Power and Control

Toddlers are beginning to develop a sense of autonomy and have a strong need for independence and control. A young child who does not have a sense of control may use biting to assert and demonstrate control in an attempt to gain a sense of feeling powerful.

Seeking Attention and Social Interaction

Infants and toddlers love and need attention from the adults in their world. To a young child, attention is attention whether positive or

negative. Biting is a powerful way to get attention quickly. Biting can also be an attempt to initiate a social interaction with a peer for a child who is not yet able to communicate “I want to play with you.”

Feeling Threatened

Biting can be used as a form of self-defense when a young child is feeling a sense of danger. The child establishes a “safety zone” through causing the individual to move away.

Imitation

Young children learn through observation and imitation of what they experience in the world around them. An infant or toddler may observe another child bite and decide to “try out” this behavior.

The Early Care and Education Environment

The physical, social and temporal (time) conditions of the early care and education environment have an impact on young children. Some infants and toddlers use biting to communicate their discomfort and stress related to the environment. Questions to ask about the environment when a child is biting:

- Is there a consistent and predictable routine to help the child feel safe and develop a sense of belonging?
- Does the schedule/routine match the child’s needs?
- Is the child or overstimulated by the environment?
 - Is it too crowded, noisy or bright?

- Are the adult-to-child ratios adequate to ensure adequate supervision/attention?
- Does the child have opportunities and space to explore and move around?
- Do learning materials, activities and adult expectations match the abilities, learning style and temperament of the child?
- Have there been any recent changes in the environment or caregivers?
- Is the child under-stimulated or bored?

Additional Resources for Information on Biting in Infants and Toddlers

Responding to Your Child’s Bite

http://csefel.vanderbilt.edu/documents/biting-parenting_tool.pdf

Why Children Bite

http://www.hopkinsmedicine.org/healthlibrary/conditions/pediatrics/why_children_bite_90,P02860

For more information on children and biting, visit www.inclusivechildcare.org.

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