Parent Easy Guide 31

Children biting

Parenting SA

Biting is a normal part of development in young children. While biting can hurt and be frightening for the child who is bitten, there are not usually any health risks.

Biting can also frighten the child who bites. They can feel very powerful because of the strong reaction and attention it brings. However, the feeling of power can be scary because they can feel out of control. Children need to feel secure and know that feelings can be managed.

What causes biting?

Experimental biting

Biting is one way babies explore the world - they put things in their mouth and biting is just part of this. It can also be a way they experiment with communication until they learn words to express their feelings. Many babies will try biting the breast when they are feeding, or try biting a parent or carer. Biting can seem like a game to them, especially if they get a big reaction.

What parents can do

Don't let children think it is funny or a game. Say firmly, 'No! Biting hurts.' Remove them quickly from the breast or arm or whatever they are biting. Babies and toddlers usually soon learn not to bite. When children are teething their gums often feel sore. Give them things they can safely bite on, e.g. teething rings.

Biting from frustration

Frustration happens when children get into situations they can't handle. Children under about three are usually not ready to play in a cooperative way with other children. If a child in a group takes their toy they may respond by hitting or biting. They have not yet learned to control their impulses or other ways to cope with frustration. If biting gets a strong response they may see it as successful and try it again.

What parents can do

- Supervise children closely. However, even the best supervision will not always prevent some children from getting in a quick bite.
- Try to avoid situations your child can't cope with. Keep group play to short times and small groups. Watch for times where two children might want the same toy and step in first to distract them.
- Redirect young children away from the situation rather than try to explain your reasons. They are too young to understand and too many words can confuse them. Young children need you to understand their feelings and your help to manage them. Feelings are very hard for young children to control and it takes a long time to learn.

Biting is not a problem of bad behaviour, it is a normal part of a child's development that passes when they learn other ways to express themselves.

Biting when feeling powerless

Often it is the youngest child in the family who bites. The older children can seem to be stronger, talk better and be more able to get what they want. The youngest can feel small and powerless. In groups, a less powerful child can discover that biting is a way of getting some power.

What parents can do

- If your child is playing with older children, explain to them how the younger one might feel. Get their help to make things more equal and make sure the needs of each child are met.
- Make separate play places for older and younger children if needed.
- If your child has already bitten, tell them it is not OK to bite and remove them from the situation. Keep them with you for a while before letting them return.

Biting under stress

Biting often occurs when a child is under emotional stress they can't handle. They may be very upset or angry and the biting is a way to show their distress and pain. Young children don't know what they are feeling - they just act!

What parents can do

- Try to find out what is causing the stress. It isn't always possible to remove the cause but you might be able to lower the stress. Plan ahead to avoid situations where you know your child might bite. Offer as much love and affection as you can at other times to help them feel secure.
- Watch what happens just before the biting happens. For example, if a child bites when another child comes into their space or takes their toy, help the child protect their space. If they have enough words you might teach them to hold out their arms and say 'Please move away'. Or you could ask your child 'What can we do to stop Anna from taking your toy? What other toy could you give her to play with?'.
- Ask other parents to support you in preventing your child from biting. Ask that they be firm but matter of fact, 'No, we don't bite'.
- Help children find other ways to express their feelings, e.g. through play and stories.

Don't bite back. This really scares a child and teaches the very thing you don't want them to learn.

The child who is bitten

When a child is bitten there can sometimes be a strong reaction from parents. It is important to comfort the child who has been bitten, whatever the reason for the bite. However, it is also important to not over-react.

Bitten children may have a big response because it brings lots of attention rather than because they are in severe pain. After some brief comforting, encourage the child to go straight back to normal play. If they are old enough, help them find ways to protect themselves that don't hurt the child who has bitten. If the child who is bitten is very young and not able to protect themselves, adults need to make sure they are kept safe.

Sometimes parents may be concerned that a bite could transfer a disease. While a bite can leave a bruise, the skin is not usually broken so there is no chance for viruses or bacteria to enter the body of the child who is bitten.

If a child is bitten at childcare, an upset parent may expect the child who has bitten to be excluded. While this reaction is understandable, it is more helpful in the long run if the centre provides specific support for the child who has bitten, and makes sure other children are protected.

Whatever the cause of the biting, respond quickly, firmly and calmly. Show your disapproval without anger or over-reacting. Remove the child from the situation and help them find another outlet for feelings.

Want more information?

Parent Helpline
Phone 1300 364 100
For advice on child health and parenting

Child and Family Health Service (CaFHS)
Phone 1300 733 606, 9am-4.30pm, Mon to Fri for an appointment. See www.cyh.com for child health and parenting information

Parenting SA
For more Parent Easy Guides including 'Living with toddlers', 'Tantrums' and 'Time in: guiding children's behaviour' www.parenting.sa.gov.au

Raising Children Network
For parenting information
www.raisingchildren.net.au

Government of South Australia

Parenting SA
A partnership between the Department for Education and Child Development and the Women's and Children's Health Network.

Ph: 08 8303 1660
www.parenting.sa.gov.au

Parent Easy Guides are free in South Australia.

Important: This information is not intended to replace advice from a qualified practitioner.

© Government of South Australia.
Revised:06/2015.