

Kids and Biting

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Having your toddler or preschooler chomp down onto the forearm of your best friend's son is not only frightening, but it's really embarrassing. What kind of parent raises a kid who bites his or her buddies? Well, just about any parent, as this type of behavior is not as rare as you may think!

Many little ones go through a biting phase in their early development. Although not unheard of in four and five year olds, many seasoned biters tend to be preverbal (one year olds) or just verbal (two and early three year olds). Most biters seem to outgrow this behavior when they can use their words to express their needs and feelings, rather than depending upon their teeth to get the job done.

Experts suggest that biting often begins as an exploratory behavior ("Wonder what it would feel like to dig my choppers into Jason's leg or to bite the hand that feeds me?"). If the child is rewarded by a significant reaction (Jason's crying or Mom's squealing), the initial exploratory nibble may evolve into a full-blown behavior problem occurring both at home and at preschool. Kid behavior that is given attention tends to reoccur, even if the adult perceives the attention as negative rather than as rewarding.

Besides getting a reaction from others, why else do little kids bite? Researchers suggest several reasons: simple tactile exploration, expression of anger, or feelings of control and power over others. Some even posit that biting behavior can be the child's claim to ownership of a coveted toy or even a person. One consistent finding, though, is that biting behavior tends to decrease as children become not only more verbal, but have picked up a few alternative social skills to use to get their needs met. It makes sense that if your two year old can ask Jason for the block rather than relying on the ol' bite, snatch and grab routine, Jason will want to play longer and won't feel the need to retaliate.

Also, as kids mature they begin to become more sensitive to how their behavior affects others, both positively and negatively. Often, little ones have difficulty making the distinction between living beings and inanimate objects. Indeed, most parents have experienced their children dragging their teddy around the house by the foot or regularly chewing the hand of a beloved doll, almost in an absent-minded fashion. This is unintentional aggression, and the chewing or biting behavior may be more habit than intention. However, just spending a few mornings at a preschool will convince you that some kids do bite purposefully—the coveted block is relinquished when it's user's hand is bitten or the teacher's wrist gets nailed as she's trying to place the biter in the time-out chair. What's a parent or teacher to do?

Regardless of whether your child's biting behavior is unintentional or purposeful it's important to try to teach her that biting really hurts. But, please don't bite back just to get your message across! The most common reaction to being bitten is to bite or to smack the child. Although retaliation will definitely get your kid's attention, the wrong lesson

may be taught. There are more civil and effective ways of letting your child know that biting is inappropriate. First, respond with a firm “NO!” as you remove the child’s mouth from your body part. Keep your verbalization short and simple. “Don’t bite me...that hurts and you are not allowed to do that!” may get the message across. I suggest to my clients that the “NO!” must be said firmly, and that close eye contact is established. This usually makes the perpetrator think twice before clamping down on your fingers again!

If you’re dealing with a dyed-in-the-wool biter and this approach is less than effective, further consequences are in order. Try placing the child for time-out in a chair, on the bottom step, in a corner, or for a two or three year old—in the bedroom. Kids generally dislike isolation and the time-out experience should reinforce that biting results in less parental or teacher attention, not more.

If plans A or B don’t work, then you may have to play hard ball with the kid. I’ve often suggested squirting the offending party’s mouth with a breath spray, as little kids’ taste buds are not yet mature, and most breath sprays are perceived as yucky. Teachers usually like this technique, as they can keep a small spray tube in their pocket and utilize it quickly and effectively. Most kids will not bite again if they know that they’ll be squirted! If you choose to go this route, be sure that the spray that you purchase is approved by your child’s pediatrician and is safe to use with a small child.

Probably the best way to deal with biting behavior, though, is to prevent it from happening in the first place. Try to determine if there is a pattern to your son’s biting. In what situations does it occur most often—at school or home, when tired or wired, with close pals or only with new kids? Many children bite when over-stimulated, and you may find that a few minutes of quiet solitary play will give your son back the self-control necessary to play with others more appropriately.

In addition to considering restricting your son’s environment while he’s going through the biting phase, it’s also wise to teach him some pro-social actions. After saying “NO!” to aggression, follow up (remember—short and simple) with a behavioral suggestion such as “I know that you want to play with Jason’s blocks—let’s ask him if you can and if not, we’ll play with the cars.” Repeatedly teaching your child an alternative technique to get his needs met will eventually teach him to use his words rather than his teeth or other aggressive maneuvers. It may not work overnight, but neither do many behavior-changing tactics. Kids can be stubborn and ornery, and may need several go-rounds before they get the message.

Not to fear, though. Your child’s biting behavior, although embarrassing and perhaps nonsensical, will pass. Biting is not so much a predictor of future behavior problems as it is descriptive of his emotional immaturity. Help him to get through this stage of development by providing close supervision, removal from over-stimulating situations, firm “NO’S”, or negative consequences such as time-out or loss of privileges. Don’t worry—he won’t bite his third grade teacher when frustrated—that would not be cool.

But, he will probably retaliate in some other, quirky fashion. Just think of what you have to look forward to!