

Biting

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Creating an inclusive environment for all children in care can be very complex. When biting issues arise, we often tend to focus on the inappropriate behaviour and search for immediate quick fix solutions. We know that there is no A-Z fixit plan but we do know that including a child and recognising the level and type of support needed is complex. Support requires involved team work and practical and realistic ideas to achieve outcomes.

Biting can be one of the most stressful issues in childcare with the thought that a child in your care can create very strong negative emotions. Biting can be very common between the ages of 14 months to 3 years and for older children who have verbal language delay.

Addressing the issue of children biting involves adults providing discipline in order to guide them into taking responsibility for their actions. Discipline is not merely a punishment - it is guidance and direction. Boundaries and limits are a part of life. Children need boundaries and limits to help keep themselves, others and the environment safe. Guidelines establish clearly for children what it is you want them to do. Example: Rule. "Don't run inside" is translated to Guideline "we walk inside".

Effective guidance is planned and good guidance is part attitude (i.e. not labelling children, distinguishing between the behaviour and the child, inviting not demanding respect) part style, part good humour, part support and giving it your best shot.

The development of strategies occurs over a period of time with re-assessment of rules and limits established. Depending on the skill level of each child the rules and limits are not necessarily changed but presented and reinforced in ways that enable children to understand and take part in the process of enforcing the rules and limits. This process is an integral component in the development of children's social skills, communication and being a valued member of a group.

In approaching biting issues it is important to take each child and his/her behaviour in context and respond according to your knowledge of the child. This needs to include considering the reason why the biting occurred, so that you can consider the cause rather than simply the resulting behaviour. It is important to be creative in your approach and open to learning from the child and yourself.

The ultimate goal is to support children to learn to be thoughtful and considerate in relation to both themselves and others.

Food for Thought

- ❖ Biting is part of normal development
- ❖ Multiple factors contribute to biting
- ❖ Biting is generally temporary
- ❖ We need to focus on reducing rather than eliminating biting
- ❖ Children often do things because they are interested and no matter what you do to distract them they will be drawn back
- ❖ Biting can be a useful behaviour for a child because it provides an effective means of exploring, learning, communicating, gaining control and releasing tension. However biting is not an appropriate response. Children will need to learn a more appropriate response to their emotions.

Why do children bite?

Children bite to meet their needs and for a variety of inter-connected reasons including:

- **Teething** – provide something for the child to gnaw on
- **Language/communication** – encourage language and use routine times to increase a child's vocabulary. Use non verbal communication as well to increase expressive language
- **Frustration** – assist a child to express their frustration in a positive manner rather than biting. Provide activities to allow a child to develop the understanding of feelings and how we deal with them
- **Attention** – ensure that the child receives positive attention on a regular basis. Encourage the intent of positive behaviour (toddlers don't always get it right)
- **Oral muscle development** – provide activities that give practice to develop the face muscles such as bubble blowing, making faces
- **Over-stimulation** – allow times during the day for quiet activities. If you see a child becoming over stimulated which may cause biting use some quieting activities to settle him/her down
- **Boredom**- assess your activities to see whether the child is not being challenged enough
- **Anxiety**- discuss with parents if biting is occurring at home and whether there has been any changes in the family and its routine e.g. new baby, shifting house etc.

Suggested Strategies

As biting is a common problem in early childhood settings, all care providers need to develop strategies for preventing and responding to biting. The strategies you choose need to be consistent and over a long period of time for the child to learn that biting is not appropriate. The following strategies are just a start and it is dependant on a variety of factors such as environment, length of time child is in care, child's interest, likes, dislikes, skills already achieved.

1. Ask yourself "Is there a pattern when the biting occurs?" The time of day and the amount of individual interaction may be causing the biting to occur.
2. Avoid any response that reinforces biting e.g. do not bite the child back in an attempt to get the child to understand.
3. Indicate that biting is unacceptable e.g. respond immediately, establish eye contact, use a stern facial expression and a firm voice saying "no biting" or "biting hurts".
4. Attend to the child who has been bitten e.g. it is important to give minimal attention to the biter and lavish attention to the child who has been bitten. If you make a fuss over the biter, even if negative, the child soon learns that this is a good way to get attention.
5. Look for and acknowledge desirable or positive behaviour from the child who bites.
6. Ensure that you document all biting incidents. This is not only an important aspect of being a professional but it may help you find situations that can cause biting to occur such as overcrowding, frustration, excitement, hunger etc.
7. Assess the activities that you provide e.g. are the activities too hard, boring, over stimulating, not enough equipment, sudden changes in the routine.
8. All parents need to be informed that you consider biting a serious matter and have strategies in place for dealing with it. If the biting occurs with the toddlers explain that this is common and that it has no long lasting developmental significance. However, clearly show what your policy and strategies that you use to deal with any biting issues that occur. Often this is a good time to gain support from the parents and to try and develop a consistent approach both in child care and at home.

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