

A parent's guide to... biting

Why do some children bite and what is the best way to deal with it? *Penny Tassoni* provides some helpful advice

Hearing that your child has been bitten by another child can be a shock. But spare a thought for the parent who has been told that their child is the one who is biting others. Biting is part and parcel of early childhood, but understanding its causes and ways of dealing with it can be helpful.

FIVE THINGS YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT BITING

1. Age

While not all children will bite others, where biting occurs it is usually with children aged between 18 months and three years old. This means that while it is clearly an unwanted behaviour, it does need to be seen and responded to as normal behaviour.

Occasionally older children do bite, but this is rarer and there are usually underlying reasons for why it happens. Biting in older children is sometimes linked to emotional upheavals in their lives, but it can also be linked to difficulties with language or social communication. For children who have a track record of biting and one that persists beyond the usual range, it may be that biting has become an attention-seeking device.

2. Just exploring

Many of a child's first bites are



Biting produces a pleasurable feeling and can become a habit if the behaviour is not tackled

‘accidental’ in nature. Children aged from 18 months to three years are still exploring by putting things in their mouths, so first bites tend to be exploratory. Some children giving a ‘first’ bite will not go on and bite again.

3. Feeling frustrated

Some bites are borne out of sheer frustration as children do not have the language or social skills to negotiate or express how they are feeling.

This means that some children will bite in order to get something that another child has. The link between language development and biting is one of the reasons why most children are not biting after the age of three.

4. Feeling good

Nature intended the act of biting to be pleasurable, which is why people enjoy taking a bite out of a biscuit or doughnut. So, this also means that once a child has bitten, the ‘feeling’

that they derive can prompt some children to bite again.

5. Being impulsive

Toddlers who bite are by their nature very impulsive and have little self-control. This means that few bites are planned. Instead, children who have bitten before may in the same conditions bite again out of



habit, even when an adult has told them to be 'good'.

Interestingly, reprimanding children, including using time out or naughty steps, seems to have very little effect on reducing a child's biting.

HOW TO DEAL WITH AND PREVENT BITING

While there can never be any guarantees that a child who has bitten can be stopped from biting again, there are a few things that can help.

If you are the parent of a child who has bitten, try not to overreact as there is no evidence to suggest that a child who bites at 18 months of age becomes a violent offender at 18 years old!

Give a strong visual message

Some children begin biting by kissing and then gently biting their parent or family member. This half-hearted biting needs to be brought to a very quick halt.

Stand up or put your child away from you, say 'no' and frown. Keep a very serious face for a while rather than using words. This is because children in this age group are more



likely to interpret that this behaviour is not acceptable through strong visual messaging.

Break the habit

Once your child has bitten another child, there is a higher likelihood that it will reoccur. The sensory feedback from the bite means that it can quickly become a habit.

The best way to break any habit is to change the situation or routine in some way. If the bites happen indoors, organise for your child to be outdoors for longer.

If it happens at certain times of the day or with certain children, it would be sensible for your child to be doing something else at these times. If possible, consider changing session times at your child's nursery or any mother-and-toddler groups that you might attend, so that your child is with a different group of children.

Check sleep patterns

Poor self-control and impulsiveness is developmentally part of the picture for children aged between 18 months and three years old, but children who bite are more likely to do so when they are tired.

If biting is occurring during the

afternoon, this could be a clue that your child would benefit from a nap.

To find out how much sleep your child should be having, visit: www.nhs.uk/Livewell/Childrensleep/Pages/howmuchsleep.aspx

Make sure that older siblings do not tease younger ones

Some bites occur as a result of younger children trying to cope with the frustration of having an older sibling tease them.

While it is common in families for older children to want to show that they remain 'top dog', keep an eye on this and make sure that your younger child is not becoming frustrated by the older one's behaviour.

Increase the amount of time you interact with your child

The link between language levels and biting and other challenging behaviours in this age group means that anything you can do to speed up your child's language development is worthwhile.

Spending an extra ten minutes a day talking while sharing books or even carrying out everyday tasks can make a huge difference to your child.

A WORD OF CAUTION

Finally, be careful of other people advising you to bite your child back as a way to end biting behaviour.

If you were to do so, you would be committing a crime, as it is illegal for any adult, including parents, to bite a child.

In addition, the nursery or other early years setting that your child attends would be duty-bound to report you to social services.

If you are worried about the extent of your child's biting, talk to your health visitor to see if there might be any other underlying reasons. ■

