



# What To Do

## When Children Bite

Handout #7

*Healthy Children, Strong Families, Caring Communities*

Biting is an upsetting behavior that can result from feelings of frustration, over-stimulation, anger, hunger, and pain related to teething. Often children use biting as a way to get their needs met. They have not yet developed more appropriate communication methods. Biting also gets a strong response from others.

Although it is upsetting and frustrating, biting behavior is common in children between the ages of fourteen and twenty-four months and for some young preschool children who are still developing their verbal skills. It is often a temporary phenomenon that fades as young children realize that biting is hurtful, and as they develop greater language skills and other types of coping skills to express their strong feelings.

The first step in dealing with biting is to try to learn about why it is taking place. The following questions may help you gain perspective on why it is happening and the solutions may become clearer. Keep in mind developmental stages, feelings, and individual needs.

- Is there a pattern to the time the biting takes place? Watching for and reading a child's cues help us learn more about the situations that lead to biting.
- Could the child be hungry? Some children fall apart behaviorally when they are hungry.
- Is the child experiencing teething pain? Attend to teething needs of toddlers through use of individual teething rings and other safe soothing things to bite on.
- Does the child seem frustrated? Reduce the child's frustration level by making activities easier for him. Teach words to use when this child is frustrated.
- How much language is the child using? Show and tell children how to use language to express feelings and state their needs and wants.
- Does the child bite one child in particular? Do your best to separate these two if you are not physically able to play alongside them.
- How often is the biting occurring? It is helpful to know the actual number of incidents when you discuss the problem with the parents of the child who is biting.



## Provide a Supportive Environment

- Provide a consistent, yet flexible schedule. Being able to predict what will happen next is empowering for children. Aim to keep your daily schedule consistent, while allowing flexibility to meet children's individual needs.
- Offer a variety of sensory activities and materials. Biting can be the result of a child's natural exploration of the "cause and effect" process. Make "cause and effect" toys and activities such as musical instruments and jack in the boxes available, and offer daily sensory activities such as painting, sand and water play or play dough. Gently and empathetically interact with children. Help children identify and name their feelings.
- Have duplicates of new and popular items to reduce frustration.
- Provide enough indoor and outdoor space for children to be active.
- Be mindful of noise levels and arrange for small, private places such as a quiet cozy area where children can go to be alone.
- Offer calming activities. Talk about feelings and offer alternate ways to work through them such as squishing play dough, hammering pegs, banging on a drum or throwing beanbags.
- Keep the waiting time between activities to a minimum.
- Offer activity choices that are at this child's developmental level.

## Responding to a Bite

It is important to respond quickly to biting incidents. Words and actions should convey a strong but gentle and caring message that biting is not acceptable and that you will help both the child who was bitten and the child who was biting.

Keeping the lines of communication open between parents and providers may help to shed some light on why a child is biting and what the best way to prevent future biting may be. A consistent approach at home and in the child care setting will help a child get the message that biting is not an acceptable behavior. In most cases, biting will decrease when adults focus on preventing frustration and teaching words to use to express feelings and solve problems.

