

WHY DO TODDLERS BITE?

It may be tempting to say, “I don’t care why they bite, I just want them to stop.” While this may be understandable, it cannot be the approach of a childcare professional. Understanding why a toddler is biting is the first step to working on the problem. The strategies you choose to help a child stop biting depend on know why he or she is biting in the first place. Toddlers bite for many reasons, and those reasons fall into several broad categories. The categories relate to developmental issues, expression of feelings and inappropriateness of the environment and program.

Reasons Related to Development

Sometimes biting is a response to the pain and discomfort of teething.

Sometimes biting is the result of **exploration**. Toddlers learn about objects and people using all their senses – how things feel in your mouth and how things taste. It isn’t too surprising when the exploration goes from mouthing to tasting to chomping.

Sometimes biting is **experimental**. Toddlers are experimenting with cause and effect – “what happens when ...” One of the experiments may become “what happens when I sink my teeth into Johnny’s arm?”

Sometimes biting is the result of **imitation**. Children learn many behaviors from other children. Biting can also be in this category. Caregivers often report that they have no biting for quite a while. Then one child bites and, the next thing you know, they have an epidemic.

Sometimes biting is related to toddlers’ developing sense of **autonomy**. They are asserting themselves as independent beings. They are making choices and taking control (or trying to take control) of situations and other people. Some toddlers bite to demonstrate this control and to have power over others.

Sometimes biting is the result of a toddler’s desire for **attention**. Toddlers who need more attention than they are getting may well notice that biting usually results in lots of attention. They would rather get the attention for a negative act than get no attention.

Sometimes biting is related to maturation of muscles resulting in toddlers’ experiences with **holding on and letting go**. We see evidence of this in separation anxiety as toddlers are struggling with holding onto and letting go of parents. We also see it in toilet learning as children learn to “hold it” until they get to the potty and then let go of urine and feces into the potty. Toddlers are sometimes holding onto the skin of someone else that has “somehow” ended up between their teeth.

Sometimes biting is related to **difficulties with sensory integration**. Some children who have problems with sensory integration may bite because ordinary movements frighten them. Their lack of motor planning may result in their biting someone when that was not what they meant to do. Children who need lots of sensory input actually bite themselves.

WHY CHILDREN BITE OTHERS

1. "Holding on and letting go"

As children's muscles mature, toddlers experiment with two simultaneous ways of handling experiences: holding on and letting go. Toddlers are learning to both hold on and let go of (1) parents and other adults (2) toys (3) bowel movements, etc. Thus, they are also learning to hang on/let go with their mouths. Often young children are not fully in control of their walking, running, handling small objects, bowel movements, urine and speech. Sometimes the skin of the other child can "just happen" to get between the child's teeth.

Program Solutions: Help ease infant/toddler separations (letting go) from their parents. If baby cries when the parent leaves say to baby "You're feeling very sad that Mommy/Daddy has to leave. It's hard to say good-bye. They will come back after lunch/nap (some concrete event)."

Give some toys to baby for hanging on/letting go; such as blocks to put into containers.

Don't pressure toilet training. Wait until child shows interest and can let go in other areas of life.

Study your environment carefully to ensure opportunities for the infant/toddler to practice blossoming motor skills.

2. Autonomy

Toddlers are developing; doing things for themselves, making choices, needing to control, making demands of adults and the environment, wanting power, moving out and away from adults. Biting can be an expression of a toddler's separation from the adult; infants/toddlers are no longer one with adults if they can bite the adult. Infants/toddlers are showing control of the other person and the situation when they bite. Toddlers may be allowed to get "out of control" by loving adults who are hesitant to set limits for toddlers.

Program Solutions: Toddlers must be helped to achieve a balance between their need for control and their need for loving, firm limits to be placed on their often uncontrollable urges. Because there are so many situations in which the adult must control the toddler, allow and provide as many situations as possible when the toddler can choose and have power: "the red

marker or the blue marker," "the cheerios or the rice krispies," whether to have "milk or not to have milk" on the cereal. Set up the environment so that the infant/toddler can have long stretches of time to explore and learn in a relaxed manner.

3. Exploration

Biting is a part of sensory/motor exploration. Toys, food, and people must be touched, smelled and tasted if a toddler is to learn. Babies are sensuous creatures who learn through the use of their senses and their motoric actions on things and around things.

Program Solutions: Provide a variety of sensory/motor experiences in the center. Infants and toddlers should experience closely supervised play with water, paints, playdough and sand. Infants/toddlers can crawl and tumble over a variety of hard, soft, rough and smooth surfaces. A colorful array of toys that can be mouthed and easily washed should be available.

4. Teething

Teething can cause an infant/toddler's mouth to hurt. Babies often need something or someone to gnaw on to comfort them.

Program Solutions: Provide an infant/toddler with teething toys, frozen bagels and chewy foods that disintegrate in the mouth and won't cause choking. The older toddler can be encouraged to bite on apples, carrots and firm teething toys. Clean frozen cloths can be kept on hand to provide cooling relief for the teething toddler (and for the child who has been bitten).

5. Peer Interaction

Infants/toddlers are just beginning to learn how to engage peers in positive ways. Infants usually do not understand they are hurting others when they bite them (older toddlers may). Infant/toddlers do not know how to approach their peers in acceptable ways. They often express their interest in others by biting, pulling hair, pushing, etc.

Program Solutions: Children need lots of social experiences in order to learn how to interact with others. Take the child's hand as they reach out to others roughly and say "touch gently, that makes her feel so happy." Acknowledge a child's interest in other children by saying, "I know you like Daren, but I can't let you chew on him. You can give him a toy." Provide enough material so children can play beside each other (parallel play) with age-appropriate materials and equipment. Notice positive peer interaction such as one child hugging another, giving a toy to another or smiling to another.

6. Cause and Effect

Infant/toddlers truly investigate cause/effect relationships beginning at approximately 12 months. It is as if they are saying, "What will happen if I bite Susie? What reaction will I get?" Biting gets a reaction and usually a very strong one! Baby often receives a loud scream from the other baby and a yell of protest from an adult.

Program Solutions: Provide toys that "do something" when the child acts on the toy. For example, when a button is pushed, a figure pops up, or when a knob is turned, music plays. Sand, dirt, water, paints, blocks and crayons allow for creative, open-ended experiences that offer many opportunities for the child to make something happen. Help them notice that positive reaction they get when they part, hug or give a toy to another child.

7. Imitation

Babies learn by imitating others and biting is one behavior that is often learned from other young persons. After 18 months, babies can observe a behavior (such as biting), store it in the memory, and perform the act later when conditions are right for it (deferred imitation). Research has shown that children who are physically punished are much more likely than their peers to be aggressive with both adults and peers – especially younger, smaller peers. They learn that hitting and biting others is an acceptable way of handling their anger if they see adults responding in that way.

Program Solutions: Model loving, nurturing, sharing, polite, positive behavior for young children to imitate. Develop a repertoire of behaviors for handling children's negative behavior. This repertoire can include: redirecting to a positive activity, giving "I" messages such as "I feel very upset when you hit Johnny because it really hurts him," actively listening to a child who is really angry by saying, "You are feeling very angry, Sarah. She took your toy and that makes you angry," or by using a brief time-out period for a biting toddler. Positive techniques do work! Children comply more readily and they learn positive ways of interacting with others.

8. Attention

The young child may bite others to get attention from others; it is true that "negative" attention seems to be better to many toddlers than no attention at all. Everyone hates to be ignored and the under threes are no exception. Some children may actually be receiving more negative attention from teachers and peers than positive attention, thus continuing the cycle of negative behavior.

Program Solutions: Blitz the biter with positive, warm, nurturing attention. This can be difficult for caregivers, especially when they are feeling exceedingly frustrated with the biter. Remember, however, that when children's positive, busy, curious, helpful, productive behaviors are noticed and rewarded the children are much more likely to continue those behaviors and behave that way more often. Break into that negative cycle of child behavior with adult positive comments and hugs for desirable infant/toddler behavior.

9. Frustration

The young child may bite others due to feelings of anger and frustration at adults and peers. A child may feel angry and frustrated because of unmet needs or because of harsh discipline techniques. A child whose cries or more positive bids for attention go unheard, or a child who is hit, slapped, yelled at, or bitten by adults may become an angry, biting child. Too many children, too high adult to child ratios or not enough space can lead to frustrated, biting children.

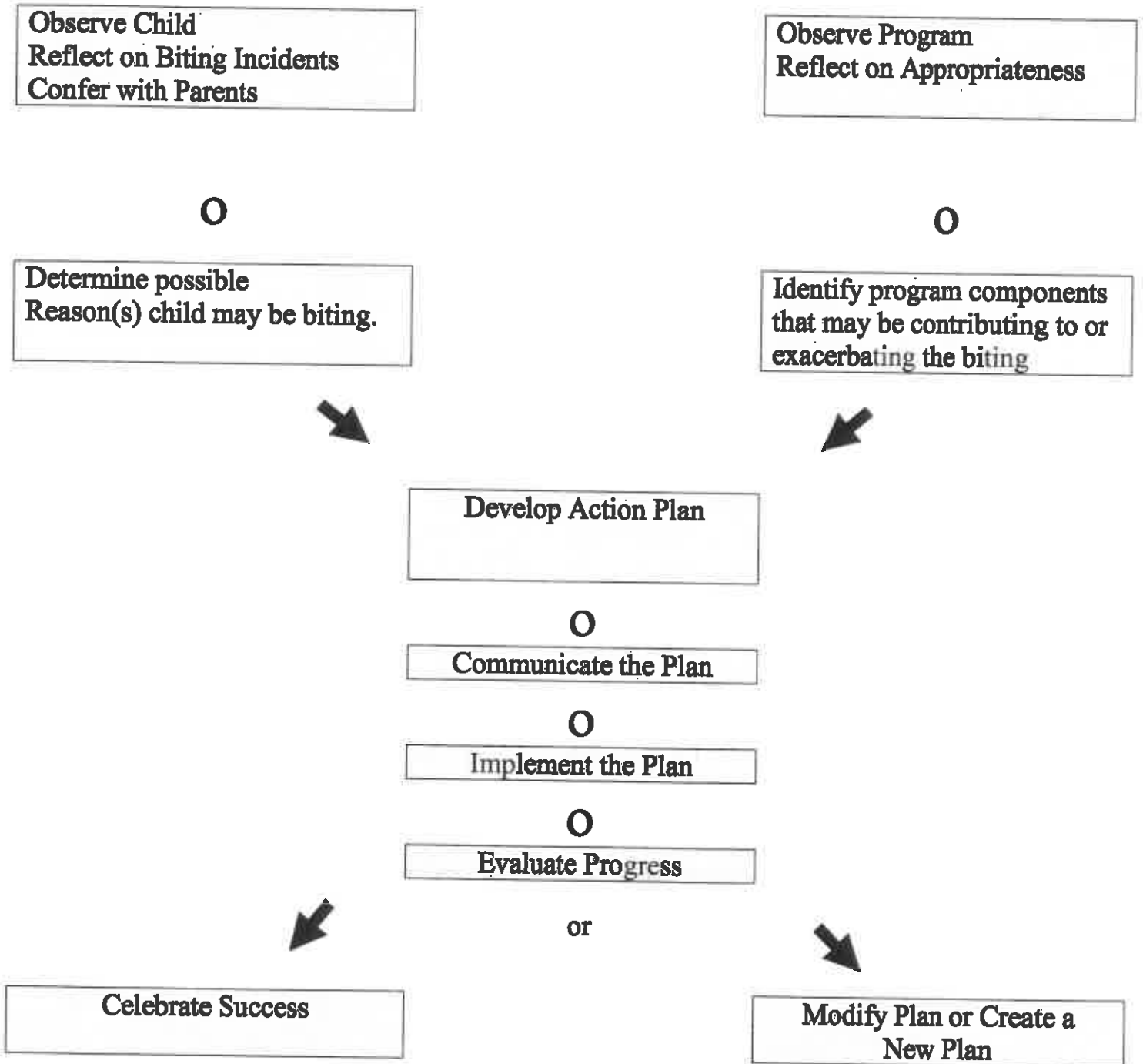
Program Solutions: Help the young child to also develop a repertoire of behaviors for handling frustrations and angry feelings. Help the child learn to say, "No!" to another child who grabs a toy. Teach the child to say, "I feel angry" (sad, happy, etc.) to adults and peers. This is not "smarting-off" to adults. It is a healthy sharing of feelings. If caregivers or parents are using punitive techniques, these adults need opportunities to learn about the effects of positive versus negative discipline techniques with young children. They can model positive techniques; talk about how they were disciplined as young children and how they felt about those techniques; and they can be encouraged to feel how a child must feel when scolded, criticized, restrained or physically punished.

10. Anxiety

A young child may be experiencing a "generalized anxiety" about events happening to him/her or around him/her (such as parents divorcing or fighting, the loss of or separation from loved ones, etc.) Anxiety may lead to the toddler biting others to relieve tension (just as adults smoke cigarettes, chew gum or bat a ball around).

Program Solutions: Work with parents to determine the source of a child's anxiety. Provide calming activities such as water or sand play. Allow the young child to suck a thumb and/or hold transitional objects (such as blankets or stuffed animals). Provide time for one-on-one with a special adult. Pat backs and sing songs at nap-time to quiet toddlers into sleep. Play soothing lullabies. Stay close to nurture the child and explain and help the child through transition times. Provide a predictable environment with a routine.

DEALING WITH ON-GOING BITING: A PLANNING MODEL



CHOOSING STRATEGIES AND TECHNIQUES TO ADDRESS ON-GOING BITING

Once you have used your observations, insights and information from parents to come up with a likely cause for the child's biting, you need to choose strategies and techniques that can address the cause. Here are some strategies and techniques tailored to some of the specific reasons children bite. It is quite likely you may need to implement some techniques to help the child as well as some changes to your program in order to address on-going biting effectively.

Strategies and Techniques Related to Development

Teething Check with parents to see what they are doing for their child's teething pain. If they are using something to soothe gums, see if you can use it in your program with the child. Make sure that you have a variety of things that teething children can chew on to relieve the pain and pressure of teething. These might include teething toys, frozen foods that are chewy and won't cause choking and clean cloths that have been frozen. Actively encourage toddlers who are teething to bite on these items; you are telling the child what you do want him to bite rather than telling him that you don't want him to bite another child after he's already done so.

Exploration Make sure you are providing many opportunities and materials for exploration. Offer supervised sand and water play. Have sensory art materials like finger paints and play dough available for supervised exploration. Give children opportunities to explore a variety of textures, spaces and places. Provide tunnels, small "forts", and different kinds of surfaces for children to crawl on. Since toddlers often explore with their mouths, make sure you have a plentiful and varied supply of toys they can put in their mouths to explore. You need to have a plan and procedure for cleaning such toys. One recommendation is to make an effort to pick up any toy you have seen a child mouth and set it aside to be cleaned; that's why you need so many of them. The toys are then washed with soap and water and sprayed with bleach-and-water solution (1 part bleach to 10 parts water or germicidal solution) and left to air dry.

Experimentation and Understanding Cause and Effect Provide toddlers with plenty of cause and effect type toys. These are toys where the child can make something happen by pushing a button or turning a knob. Use art materials so they can make colors and designs appear by wielding a brush or marker. Hands-on activity books where the toddler can lift flaps, pull-tabs, etc. are other good examples of cause and effect materials. Describe the cause and effect relationships you see the child engaging in. "Look at that. When you moved the paintbrush across the paper, you made all that blue." "Every time you pull the string, that little door opens and you can see the clown." You are helping the child understand "what happens when..." and "what happens if..." You can use this same technique when a child bites. Make sure that the child does not profit from biting. Do not allow the child to keep a toy that was obtained by biting the child who originally had it. Use cause and effect words to explain the situation. "If you bite someone to get a toy, you can't keep the toy." Also use cause and effect statements to describe the painful result of biting. "When you bit Maura, it hurt her and she cried." Make sure that you also use these statements for positive behaviors. "When you help me put away the blocks, we can find them and play with them again." "When you got more play dough, Maura could use it too and she likes that."

Imitation When you suspect a toddler might be biting because he or she is imitating another child, provide lots of other, more acceptable behavior for the child to imitate. Give the child examples in your own behavior of nurturing, sharing, respectful, polite, empathetic behavior that you would also like the child to imitate. It is just as important for you to show the child positive examples of handling anger and frustration. Just letting the child hear how to express anger or frustration is beneficial. When you say, "I was so frustrated when I couldn't get the jar open," or when you respond to a child who is angry with, "You are so angry with Malik because he took the truck you had," you are giving the child a new behavior to imitate.

Emerging autonomy Toddlers need many opportunities to feel powerful and competent while still being safe. You can help foster the child's sense of having some power by structuring choices, letting the child make a choice and then respecting that choice. Of course you cannot let a child loose to run into the street instead of holding your hand when crossing a busy intersection; that's why it is your role to structure choices within an acceptable range. You can offer the toddler the choice between fingerpainting or using the brushes to paint or a choice putting the napkin on the table first or the cup on the table first. When the toddler makes the choice, reinforce the power of choosing and support the choice by commenting, "You decided to put the napkin on first." Then make sure you let the child follow through. Although it may seem difficult at first, try to provide as many opportunities for choosing as possible because there really are so many times that you must place firm (and always loving) limits on their behavior to keep them safe.

Desire for attention If you think a child is biting to get attention, try a pre-emptive technique. That is, give the toddler lots of attention before he resorts to getting it by biting. Rather than making the child wait for attention, ask for it or earn it, give it freely and lavishly. This may not be easy because often the children who need positive attention the most are the ones we are least likely to pay attention to. Make the effort to notice and comment on all the behaviors that are acceptable – like being curious, helping, creating, etc. The child who had been biting to get the attention will learn that other, more positive behaviors are even more likely to get you attention.

Holding on and letting go Give the toddler lots of opportunities to practice holding on and letting go. This can be in the form of two favorite toddler activities, "Pick up little things and put them into containers" and "pick up, carry around and dump." Both give the child the opportunity to enjoy and practice holding on and letting go. Work on emotional "letting go" as well. Help toddlers who are having a difficult time with separations by telling them (for example), "You're so sad when your Daddy has to go. It's hard for you when Daddy leaves. He will go to work and then he will come back after we play outside." Children who are having trouble holding on and letting go are not ready to control and "let go" of urine or feces, so hold off on toilet learning.

Strategies and Techniques Related to Expressing Feelings

Frustration and Anger Help the child learn to express frustration and anger with words. Teach the child to say an emphatic “No!” or “Stop it!” to another child who is trying to take a toy

or book away from him. Encourage children to say, “I don’t like it when ...” or “I am so mad when ...” Being able to express feelings with heartfelt words may prevent children from expressing those feelings with their teeth. Also learn to recognize signs of frustration in the child. When you see the child begin to get frustrated, use redirection to help her out of the situation. For example, a 6-piece puzzle may be too difficult for her; be prepared to redirect her to a puzzle with 3 pieces so she can experience success instead of frustration.

Tension Observe the child so you will recognize signs of mounting tension. Help to relieve tension in the mouth and jaw by gently massaging the joint where the jaw meets the skull (just in front of the ear) with circular motions. Step in to redirect the child when he or she is getting into a potentially tense situation. (For example, the child may try to get into a private space that another child is already occupying.) Provide more gross motor activities such as music and movement activities that involve arms, legs and torso to relieve tension. Also go outside more often to relieve the tension associated with being in more confined spaces.

Anxiety Use your own observations and information from the child’s parents to understand why the child may be anxious. Provide a calm atmosphere by playing soothing music, giving the child one-on-one attention during the day. Make sure there is a place for the child to go to get away from the pressures of the group. This might be a quiet corner with soft pillows, or a “house” just big enough for one made out of a big cardboard box. Help the child calm himself by allowing him to suck his thumb (if he already does this) or bring a favorite blanket from home. Give the child plenty of time to eat, make transitions, use the toilet, etc. to reduce feelings of pressure. Soothe the child at naptime with back rubs and songs.

Excitement Encourage toddlers to develop a variety of physical (non-biting) expressions of excitement. Have them clap happily, jump up and down, dance around and yell “Yay!” for example. Do it with them when the occasion calls for excitement. Be aware that children who, by temperament, have intense reactions may bite when excited. During moments of great excitement, you may want to position yourself near them to redirect their excitement to one of the appropriate actions.

Biting related to inappropriate environment and/or programming Doing a program check to evaluate your environment, materials and activities, interactions and schedules will help you identify changes related to programming that may help reduce or eliminate the biting. This is especially true if you have an outbreak of biting. This is covered in more detail on pages -----

What to try when nothing else has seemed to work When you have exhausted all other possibilities, you may want to try having someone shadow the child who is biting. This involved having one staff person stay with the child, positioning herself between the child’s mouth and other children. Shadowing is intense, vigilant work but it usually works. The staff person

shadowing the child is usually able to redirect the child before biting occurs, showing the child different, more acceptable behavior. This means that instead of biting, the child is going through the day not biting, and this can become his new behavior. Because shadowing means that one staff person must be devoted to watching and staying with just one child, it is usually difficult for programs to do. If it is tried before other steps in the problem-solving process, its effect is not likely to be permanent. This is because when shadowing stops, problems that may have been contributing to the biting will still exist, and the biting is likely to start again.