

Why children bite and strategies to implement

Many practitioners want to know why it is a child should want to bite. Biting is not premeditated in children; it is more to do with the fact that the child is responding to a situation in line with their developmental stage. Remember this behaviour is a symptom of an underlying issue and not a cause. Identify and remove or minimise the issues that are causing the behaviour and support the child in finding alternatives. As we would provide additional support for children in developing their physical skills, we also need to provide support in emerging social and emotional skills.

There are four different kinds of biting

Experimental or exploration biting is when children are exploring their world. All babies and toddlers learn through touching, smelling, hearing and tasting. We know that when a child is given a toy the first thing that you observe is that the toy will go straight into the mouth. This is where the child is exploring the toy by feeling it.

When a child bites another child in this way, get down to the child's level and firmly say "Stop. Biting hurts". Be aware not to give too much attention to the child who has bitten and do not over react to the situation. If the child is teething then offer a teething ring or other appropriate toy.

Frustration biting: Play becomes an important part of the child's life, as children are learning to play with each other in a cooperative manner. However, this type of play presents certain challenges and some children are unable to cope in certain situations, for example when a toy is taken from them. The only way they can respond is by biting the child who has taken the toy from them because they do not know how else to react or do not have the ability to communicate their feelings. This is where the practitioner needs to step in and get down to the child's level and say, "We don't bite, biting hurts". Partner the child's play and interactions and model simple language and strategies to communicate their needs within their play choices. If necessary redirect to another activity and provide support alongside their play to positively engage their attention. Let the child know it is the act that you disapprove of and not them. Show them that you care.

Powerless biting: Some children bite because they are powerless to do anything else. This could also be attention seeking because the child does not receive attention at home or in the nursery or playgroup. Make sure there is enough supervision and that children who are quiet are given as much attention as the children who are more confident. Help children through activities to be able to express their feelings. But be aware of children who are unable to effectively communicate, and offer visual prompts such as natural gesture and signing, or pictures.

Stressful biting: Yes, children suffer from stress just as much as us adults. This could be because of sheer boredom. There may not be enough activities in the setting based on the children's interests/stages of

Practitioner guidance

development, the activities may not be challenging enough. There may be little variety of activities. It could also be because the setting does not plan for and encourage appropriate levels of self-motivated play and expression. This type of biting also occurs because of emotional stress, e.g. moving home, a new baby, death in the family or death of a pet. When children experience stress their cortisol levels are raised and they are unable to moderate their behaviour.

You can help by providing secure attachments with children and by amplifying the positive actions they make will help them to moderate their negative interactions. You can also help children by providing a stimulating, challenging and flexible environment. Try to find out why the child is biting and what the possible cause can be. Try to help the child express their feelings through play.

What you can do about biting?

Children usually bite because they are unable to express their feelings as they have not yet developed the skills or understanding to negotiate or understand other children's point of view.

Evaluate your provision

Relationships

- Work in partnership with parents, make sure you are responding to the child's home routines
- Provide emotional support through a key person system
- Ensure that all parents are aware of your policies and approach in these situations and why, e.g. policies based on child development theory; current research; children's different rates of development; children's and parents' right to confidentiality; input from outside agencies; influence of home activities - play fighting / biting, siblings, pets; biting being a symptom not a cause
- Be aware of changes in home routines through regular contact with parents through a key person approach
- Ensure all adults model appropriate language and ask questions about the choices children make
- Find out if parents have sought advice from their GP or health visitor or Children and Family Centre

Environment

- Ensure there are multiple resources to support children's play alongside and with each other
- Provide spaces and opportunities for children to be alone
- Provide opportunities for children to express themselves and practice the language of feelings through appropriate resources
- Ensure children can independently access comfort objects

Practitioner guidance

- Provide appropriate, flexible structures and environments that respond to children's natural routines e.g. rolling snack, workshop areas, small and short group times

Responding to children who bite

- Give a measured response, try not to over react
- Divert attention to another activity but keep a watchful eye
- Show that it is the behaviour you disapprove of and not the child
- Try to find out what causes the biting by carrying out observations and recording them. Use the star observation sheet
- Acknowledge positive behaviour and give praise so that you are building up children's self-esteem
- Provide additional support for children during stressful routines e.g. group times, tidy up time, snack time
- Provide visual strategies for children to understand certain routines e.g. visual timetables, visual sequences
- Provide multi-sensory signals to denote an end of an activity or a change in routine e.g. rain stick, sand timer
- Provide opportunities for children to explore the feelings of other children and provide alternative responses e.g. persona doll
- Provide emotional support through a key person approach
- Work in partnership with other professionals who may be supporting the child/family to make sure strategies are consistent

If you think a family would benefit from support from the Children and Family Centre team – provide information about the support available and ask for their consent to make a referral.