

Helping a Child Who Bites

If your child bites think of it as a big wave of tension that has suddenly flooded his brain. It's not a planned, willful behavior, but a build up of frustration inside him, which has no permissible outlet. His body does it for internal reasons, and he simply can't control it. It will help you deal with it more constructively, if you think of it just like a cough, hiccup or a sneeze. Your child may feel afraid or frustrated because he's not getting enough close, relaxed time with you or his caregivers or when his stress builds up, he is not able to express his fears or frustrations through typical outlets like crying and temper tantrums. You may want to explore why his environment may not be conducive to expressing his feelings. Biting may also be a substitute for not having the language skills to express himself or may he may be the type of child that has an excessive need for oral stimulation. The good news is that you don't need to know the reasons a child is biting to do something about it. Remember that biting does not release a child's inner tension. A child actually feels much worse after he's bitten someone and it just adds to his stress load and makes him more upset. If he looks like he doesn't care he's probably frightened. Here's how you can begin to help your child release tensions in productive ways.

Handling the Biting

As a first step, focus on strengthening his ability to feel your attention and love. Special time together is an ideal tool to get started. Set a time for about 20 minutes (can use a Time Timer-purchase on line) get close to your child, offer warmth, make eye contact, show enthusiasm and actively engage in play with something your child chooses to do. Allow your child to guide the selection and play the way your child wants you to play. If he chooses to play by himself, keep offering your gentle touch (even if you have to tickle him) maintain eye contact and try to make him laugh. Laughter releases tension and helps children feel safe, understood and it serves as a good distracter from tension. When the time is over, let him know how much fun you had playing with him and that you'll set up more special time soon. Try to do this daily or at least several times a week. If your child cries when you have to stop just say "I'm sorry you feel so upset, I'll listen, you can come and talk to me anytime". Listen until he's done crying, relax him and tell him you'll be listening and checking in on him. You want to encourage him to show his feelings as they arise and to seek you out when he needs reassurance.

If he bites you as you try to calm him you need to say, "I can't let you bite me-use your words and tell me how you're feeling". Offer eye contact and stay very close to him. Your attention helps him focus on the feelings he needs to express and heal, and it provides the love that needs to be engraved in his heart. You have to catch him before he's ready to bite, put your hand on his forehead, you'll then be able to keep yourself safe

and he'll be able to notice the tension that drives him to bite. Your support helps him feel the fear that's bothering him and builds his inner tension.

When he bites go over to him and tell him gently and quietly that you're sorry you couldn't get to him on time to help keep him safe. Then, make eye contact ask him to tell you how he feels and reassure him how much you want to be with him at that moment. Look at the behavior as his attempt to connect; any caring adult is a good person to intervene. All he needs is your kindness, your warmth and reassurance.

The minute you see your child bite someone, say "no biting" or "biting hurts you see Mary is crying" (cause & effect connection), then focus your attention to the child that was bitten.

Ways Your Child Can Express Frustration

Biting may be a substitute for not having the language skills to express himself. Try to put into words what you guess your child may be thinking. Over time encourage him to use his words to label his feelings and express himself freely, "I'm angry with you" or "That's my toy" instead of biting.

Hugging a stuffed animal or keeping a weighted pillow stuffed with rice on his lap.

Shorten activities or give him a break can help prevent the rising frustration that results into biting.

Plan and give your child enough one on one time throughout the day by reading or playing with him so he doesn't bite as a means of connecting with you.

Make every effort to make sure that all his needs including eating and nap time are taken care of before you go out to do outside errands or activities. Bring along a snack to soothe him if he gets cranky.

Build physical activity to his daily routine such as 10 jumping jacks before lunch, riding his bike after school, stretching before bedtime.

He may have an excessive need for oral stimulation. Provide crunchy but healthy snack at regular intervals across the day, or let him chew on a water bottle or on a clear tubing placed on the back of a pencil.

Your child may be overwhelmed and overly stimulated by light, sound, certain textures, smells. Manage and minimize his sensory input.

When you sense your child is getting frustrated give him a bear hug to help him hold it together and give him the comfort he needs.

Create a “cozy corner” or a “thinking chair” that he can go to when he’s stressed or overwhelmed over a stressful situation.

Things to Avoid

Shaming or harsh punishments do not reduce biting but do increase your child’s fear and worry, which in turn can increase biting incidents.

Biting back is not a useful response or an appropriate response that you want to model or encourage.

Make sure he doesn’t get punished for biting by losing recess time, as this will make the problem worse.

Remember that children who bite are children with good heart in need of a good cry in the arms of a caring and sensitive adult.