HANDLING A BITER

Biting is a fairly common occurrence among toddlers. Many developmental characteristics influence this.

- Toddlers lack language skills to express feelings, wants and needs with words.
- Toddlers lack self-control to curb their impulses.
- Toddlers do not understand others have rights and feelings.
- Toddlers do not understand biting is wrong or that it hurts.
- Toddlers may be cutting large teeth like molars and eye teeth, which can be painful and cause focus to be on the mouth.

Toddlers sometimes bite adults, usually parents. This type of biting can be a result of frustration or it can be experimentation. When the toddler accidentally bites the adult too hard and gets a strong reaction, he may try it again. Toddlers bite other children, usually siblings or other toddlers. Most often, this occurs when toddlers fight over a toy. It can also occur when toddlers are too close together in a confined space (like a play tunnel or fort). Sometimes biting is totally unprovoked. Because human bites carry a high risk of infection and disease, always check with your health care professional if a bite breaks the skin.

HANDLING BITING

The goal for adults is to communicate that biting is wrong and won't be tolerated. Be firm without being harsh. Make eye contact on the child's level and use clear, simple statements. "No biting!" "Biting hurts!" "I won't let you hurt people." Separate the biter for a minute or two or redirect to another activity.

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It is important to label the behavior: "Biting hurts! I know you want the toy, but I won't let you bite." Instead of labeling the child: "You naughty boy! Only mean children bite." If you, the adult, have been bitten, make eye contact and your statement —"I don't like to get bit. That hurts!"— then walk away and refuse to make eye contact or interact with the child for one to two minutes. This is called "self time-out." Toddlers do not like to lose your eye contact! After this short time-out, give a hug and go on without any more reference to the biting. With toddlers, a lecture may only remind them and may cause them to bite again. Remember, they learn by repetition!

PREVENTION

The best prevention for biting is supervision. Groups of toddlers should always be well supervised.

- Be sure toddlers get enough attention and that adults listen to their attempts at talking and respond.
- If there is a biter in the group, assign one adult to stay nearby. Watch closely when toddlers gather in small areas.
- Teach children to use words to get what they want. "Tommy, you can say, 'Please give me the car when you're finished.'" Praise children when they do use words.
- Control your own temper, emotions and actions. Children look to you as a role model.
- If biting is happening many times throughout the day or if one child is biting often, consider keeping a log. Record who bites, when, where, who is bitten and why. Look for patterns of behavior that you can influence.

When it is suggested that an adult bite the child back to show them how it feels, the experts are unanimous: DON'T DO IT. Nor should adults insist that the biter apologize. Saying, "I'm sorry" isn't meaningful to a very young child and trying to force an apology can result in a battle of wills no one will win. Instead, call the child's attention to how the victim feels. "Look at your friend's face. She is crying because biting hurts." You can suggest the biter give a hug to help the friend feel better but don't insist. Supervise this contact closely to avoid another bite!

Life is full of frustration for a toddler. Be patient. Many toddlers go through a "biting stage" lasting several weeks. Biting usually diminishes by age 3, when children have developed more self-control and better language skills.

For more information, contact the Family Life Educators at 605-322-3660 or familylifeeducators@avera.org.

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