



BITING BROPHY

CALMING THE CHAOS

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Biting Can Demonstrate Pain, Frustration, or Simple Exploration

Developmentally Speaking

It is normal for children to bite sometimes before they have words to express frustration, dysregulation, excitement, and sometimes even pleasure. For example, a toddler may bite to indicate when someone is invading their space and they don't have a more powerful way to get that person to move away.

Children also sometimes bite to indicate they feel overwhelmed, tired, or simply to explore what happens when they bite something or someone. It's even typical for young children to experiment with the boundaries between themselves and others through physical means like biting.

Children who bite need your help to learn better ways to communicate, express their feelings, and find solutions when problems arise.

Steps to Decrease Biting

Step 1: Determine if there is a **medical** reason for the biting.

For example, does the child have a loose or painful tooth? Sore throat? Or even allergies?

Step 2: Observe and collect information when there are other reasons behind the biting. Your aim is to determine the child's main ways of communicating. This will help you begin to uncover why they are biting.

For example, is the child extremely verbal EXCEPT when over-excited and then will be very physical in lots of ways? Is the child less verbal and exploring their environment by mouthing things?

Step 3: Modify the learning environment so it is more responsive to the child's subtle or non-verbal attempts to communicate.

For example, be on the lookout for signs they are becoming anxious or frustrated, teach other children how to read their cues too, and ensure enough materials and space for children to play peacefully with one another. Lastly, consider having a "bite box" of objects that are okay to bite at certain times throughout the day to allow biting with appropriate safety measures in place.

Step 4: Plan for successful interactions during situations that present a high chance of biting. Your actions and interactions very short and highly prompted at first for everyone's safety.

For example, when a child bites, immediately redirect them to something they are allowed to bite. Give the child an immediate replacement (e.g., a sippy cup or bite stick of some sort) if necessary as you are discovering the why behind the biting. This will provide the immediate message that biting someone else is not acceptable but doing something else with their mouth is acceptable.

Step 5: Prepare and calm yourself during the situations where you anticipate the child is likely to bite so you can create change that supports the child during this difficult situation.

For example, are you clenching your own teeth in anticipation that the child may bite you or others? Do you feeling frustrated or fearful? Take a moment to soften your face, your jaw, even your hands before you interact.

Step 6: When necessary (and possible), step in and guide the child away from others before the biting occurs. You can also attempt to disrupt the child in the moment by asking them to become aware of how they are feeling, to redirect the flow of their energy and thinking, and to then learn new ways of responding before they are to the point of biting.

For example, when a child is going in for a bite, try not to yell “Stop biting” or “Don’t bite”...it’s super hard for children to stop mid action...meaning while their mind and body is in motion. Instead, try saying, “Sit down,” or “Stand on one foot”, “Touch your head”... “Clap your hands”... “Here, chew this”. All of these statements allow the motion to still flow, not result in a bite, and provide a better alternative for calming their system.

Step 7: Calm the storm during those times when you need to guide the child away from the situation or the act of biting. The goal here is guide them to re-regulate not to teach about rules around biting.

For example, guide the child to breathe deeply in coordination with your deep breaths, squeeze a fidget, or even bite something appropriate.

Step 8: Help the child successfully return to the situation once regulated versus allowing the bite to end the activity. Otherwise, you will be teaching them to bite when they want to signal they are finished with something. If you feel it is important to revisit the classroom rule of “no biting”, be sure to keep a few things in mind.

For example, instead of saying, “No biting,” consider saying, “Bite only food” or another positive statement that keeps the focus on what the child can do. There are some children who hear “No biting!” and have yet to understand negation, which means they hear “biting.” Further, a long conversation about good and bad behaviors will not make sense to them if they were reacting to a strong impulsive feeling. Lastly, keep in mind, if this is an infrequent behavior, and you have addressed it in the immediate moment, sometimes it is ok to just “kiss and makeup” and move on with the day. Providing clarity then assuming competence is always preferred over lecturing.

Step 9: Assume a positive and functional intent. While it can be a challenge, try not to jump to the conclusion that the child is being “manipulative” or “knows better.” Spend time figuring out why and how to help them generate better ways of expressing themselves.

Step 10: Practice in multiple environments, including home and out in the community. And share this tip sheet with all those involved (e.g., parents, therapists) for optimal and fast results.

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