When a child bites or is bitten, a strong emotional response is sure to follow. Children and adults alike may experience overwhelming feelings of fear, anger, frustration, and guilt. Biting by a child of any age cannot be tolerated. It is not safe, socially acceptable, or helpful in creating a positive environment for children. And most of all — biting hurts!
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WHY DO CHILDREN BITE?
Most biting occurs among toddlers who have limited language skills or ways to express their feelings. Preschoolers, too, may occasionally bite when they have become so frustrated or overly tired that they have lost all control. Pressures to keep pace with a hurried adult world can be very stressful for young children. They often need more time than adults allow to move from one activity or setting to another: home to child care, dinnertime to bedtime. Also, intense play such as tickling or wrestling for an extended time can overwhelm children and lead them to bite.

WHEN TO INTERVENE
Adults must intervene quickly, calmly, and firmly. Most often, a child bites because he is out of control, which is very frightening to him. Parents and caregivers can help children the most by staying in control themselves. Reassure both the child who bit and the victim. If possible, keep both children by your side as you inspect and wash the bitten area with warm, soapy water. This way, you are demonstrating the consequences and the seriousness of the behavior.

Why Do Children Bite?

Children often bite for a variety of reasons, including:

- **Teething**
  - When gums are sore and swollen, biting can feel good. Offer the child a teething biscuit, firm rubber teething ring, or a frozen bagel.

- **Attention-seeking**
  - Young children may try a variety of ways to gain attention, including biting. Give the child attention when he is not biting, so that he is less likely to bite to gain attention.

- **Power/aggression**
  - When children experience a need for power and control, they may bite other children, and the reaction only reinforces the biter’s behavior. Share acceptable ways to interact with others. Encourage positive social behavior like sharing or waiting turns.

- **Territorial/defense**
  - A child may bite when he feels threatened. He may be trying to protect his play space, toys, and himself from overwhelming surroundings. Comfort the child and let him know that he is safe. Make sure that the area is not too crowded and there is ample space and toys.

- **Frustration/stress**
  - Unable to express her intense feelings with words, biting may occur. A move, divorce, or new sibling can cause feelings of frustration and stress. Be aware of signs that show rising frustration. Teach her ways to show her feelings appropriately and praise her when she communicates properly.

- **Evaluate the children’s environment to make sure there is ample space, equipment, and toys to keep all the children occupied and to minimize having to wait turns.**

- **Avoid overstimulation for a child who becomes easily frustrated. Keep groups small and make play periods shorter with less challenging activities.**

- **Increase adult supervision to intervene before frustration levels rise.**

- **Teach cooperation throughout the day, demonstrating words and phrases children can use to express their desires and feelings. Praise cooperative behavior.**

- **Familiarize yourself with the child’s signals of rising frustration or anger.**

- **Be aware of the child’s current situation. Does a parent have a new job or exams at school? Is there a loss or an addition to the family? Evaluating what a child is experiencing helps in understanding what a child may need so that she does not resort to biting.**

**WAYS TO DISCOURAGE BITING**

- **Teeth Are Not for Biting**
  - Elizabeth Verdick, illustrated by Marieka Heinlen

- **Becoming the Parent You Want to Be**
  - Laura Davis & Janis Keyser

- **Why Do Children Bite?**
  - Laura Davis & Janis Keyser

**In the News**

- **Children May Bite for a Variety of Reasons**

Never encourage a child to bite back and never bite a child to show that it hurts! Your message should always be clear and simple: biting is never acceptable for anyone.
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