



So you want to know more about...

Biting

Reality Bites

It's the news every parent dreads: "Your child was bitten today." Your heart lurches. You ask: "Who did it?"

More often than not, it doesn't matter. In the majority of bites, the *whos* are less important than the *whys*. Adults often personalize the issue, but children who are bitten are usually just in the wrong place at the wrong time.

Experimental biting is a normal behavior which emerges with other exploratory aggression (hitting, kicking, or throwing things) between 1– 2 years of

age. Children notice when their "accidental" behaviors elicit strong reactions and repeat them. Adults often respond emotionally to bites, but a loud, dramatic response is actually more likely to reinforce the behavior than to discourage it.

So what *can* we do about it?

At Gretchen's House we:

- Track biting behavior to see if patterns emerge, then reduce contributing factors;
- Respond consistently to all aggression;
- Focus the majority of our attention after a bite on the

victim rather than on the biter;

- Remove children who are out of control from the large group until they have calmed down;
- Eliminate any "playful" aggression like wrestling while the child learns the limits of acceptable contact;
- Keep children in small groups as much as possible to reduce frustration;
- Stay cool: a calm, clear, and swift response is the most effective way to show that biting will not be tolerated.

Why do children bite?

There are many reasons why young children may bite each other or adults:

- Oral exploration: Infants explore objects and their world orally.
- Teething: Biting down on objects can bring relief from teething pain.
- Frustration: Non-verbal children may bite to get someone's attention or because they don't have other suitable outlets for their frustration.
- Over-stimulation: Children who feel overwhelmed may bite to release tension.
- Defensively: Biting in response to a physical threat is an instinctive defensive response.
- Bids for attention: Biting can become a habit if it produces the desired affect (lots of attention, no matter how negative).
- Instrumentally: To obtain a toy, manipulate objects, or gain a little personal space.

Further reading about biting

- ♦ *Bootsie Barker Bites*
by Barbara Bottner
- ♦ *So This Is Normal, Too,*
by Deborah Hewitt
- ♦ *What to Expect The Toddler
Years,* by Arlene Eisenberg,
Heidi Murkoff, and Sandee
Hathaway
- ♦ *Your Baby and Child,*
by Penelope Leach

Frequently Asked Questions

What makes some children bite while others don't? We don't know. Our job would certainly be easier if there were a definitive answer to this question! Environmental factors can influence the frequency of bites, but that's not the whole picture. We do know that appropriate and consistent responses decrease the likelihood of future bites.

What health and safety precautions do you take? Our staff are trained in First Aid and Blood-Borne Pathogen preventive measures. We wash bites with warm water and antibacterial soap, then treat with Bactine® if the skin is broken. We may apply ice or vinegar to reduce bruising. We call parents if a bite breaks the skin.

Do you ask children who bite to leave your program? We make every effort to see if our program can meet the biting child's developmental needs while we keep other children safe. We use a **bite log** to track contributing factors and developing patterns. We may designate staff to **shadow** a child who's biting or temporarily hire an extra person to **spot** (stay with the child all day to supervise and coach) a child who's having difficulty. Rarely, the director may suggest a 1-2 week break from group care if a child seems unusually stressed. In cases of persistent biting (i.e., biting on a daily basis without signs of improvement in spite of a concerted response), our consulting psychologist and pediatrician help us make the difficult decision as to whether our program is an appropriate setting for the child who is biting.

Why does my child seem to be a favorite target? Remember that we don't tell you when other children are bitten. Also, children who are assertive and who interact with more children will statistically be exposed to more situations where bites may happen. The **bite log** helps us identify and address these dynamics.

What exactly is this "bite log"? Can I see it? We keep track of any and all bites that occur in a program, noting the children involved, apparent cause, staff response, and action plans, if appropriate. The bite log is confidential.

Why won't you tell me who bit my child?

Unfortunately, that information will not help you prevent future bites. We must protect the confidentiality of all children, including your own child, when behavioral issues arise. Most children bite other children or adults at some time during their early years. Because we expect this normal behavior, we may not address it with the parents of the child who bites until it becomes a *pattern* of behavior. We **will** tell you the situation when your child was bitten, how we handled it, and what we plan to do to reduce the likelihood of it happening again.

My child told me who bit her and I'm going to deal with this myself by contacting her parents!

Although we understand your frustration with the situation, we think this type of response is entirely unhelpful and inappropriate. The parent of the child who bites was not supervising the child when it happened, and "discussing" bites at home, hours after the fact, can actually reinforce the behavior by providing special attention (albeit negative) for it.

What's your typical response to a bite? It

generally takes about 2 weeks of concerted effort to extinguish a typical negative behavior. Biting falls into the same category as hitting, kicking, pushing, throwing toys, and other physical expressions of frustration. Here is our recommended response for all of these kinds of behaviors:

1. Say, "STOP BITING" emphatically and remove the biter from the situation.
2. Calmly tell the child: "Biting hurts. When you hurt kids, I will help you stop."
3. Focus your attention on the victim. Treat any discomfort and acknowledge the scariness of the situation. Do *not* force the biter to apologize. Some children may be interested in or able to be gentle or comforting to the child they hurt. Only encourage this if it is okay with the victim.
4. Remember that losing control is scary for children who bite, too. Help them make some safe play choices and stay in control for the remainder of the activity.
5. If biting continues, restrict play choices until the child is in control of herself.