

Learning how to behave appropriately, how to communicate their needs, manage frustrations and emotions, develop empathy towards others all takes time and will continue to develop throughout their childhood.

We all need to develop social skills for life; being with other people and children is the best way to learn. The role of the adults who are with the child is hugely important, what we do helps inform, support and shape children's learning.

The aim of this leaflet is to help understand why a child bites and to give suggestions as to how to deal with it.

Biting is surprisingly common amongst young children, especially between the ages of 14 months to 3 years. However, how we deal with it can either help to move away from a habit or can exacerbate a habit.

Why do children bite?

Biting happens for a variety of reasons. It is important that we try to understand the reasons to help children move out a biting stage successfully.

Exploring: Very young children learn through their senses; through the smelling, touching, hearing and, tasting (or exploring textures with the mouth!) Babies and young toddlers do not understand the difference between biting an object or a person. They will not have the understanding that biting hurts others.

Teething: This causes discomfort and results in biting objects, and sometimes people.

Cause and effect: Toddlers develop an awareness of when things happen, or when they do something, something else may happen – including the reaction when they bite someone, of the person they bit, or the other people around them. As a natural way of learning, they may repeat the action in order to try to understand the reaction it causes.

Attention: biting is a quick way to become the centre of attention. Often children enjoy this, even if it is negative.

Independence: young children may learn that biting is a way of getting their own way, especially with other children who may give in to their demands.

Imitation: All children learn by watching and imitating. Therefore if they see other people biting (or even kissing) they may impulsively decide to copy. It is wise to note here that biting back as a reprimand actually encourages more biting.

Communication: When children do not have the skills to verbalise they may resort to biting when frustrated or being unable to make themselves understood.

Self-Defence: some children bite because other children have bitten or been aggressive in some way. Some children may feel uncomfortable when another child invades their 'personal space' or they may not welcome another child's tenderness.

Working out why a child bites can help solve the problem

Early Years Practitioners work hard at understanding each child as an individual, trying to build a picture of their life at home and at nursery, working out their individual characters and needs, and linking this to their knowledge of child development. At Red Hen we are proud to have well trained, caring and vigilant staff, however there are times when a bite happens in a flash despite the staff member being there with them. Sometimes, quite without malice, under-one-year-olds bite another child who happens to be there. It is rare that a child's biting only happens at nursery, indeed many parents report biting incidents at home after it has been mentioned by nursery staff.

How can we help children learn not to bite?

- It is imperative that we stay calm, respond appropriately and encourage children to develop the skills they need to express themselves or learn how to be around others.
- Experimental biting is relatively frequent with under-twos. Offer the child something else to bite. If you know a child is teething ensure there are plenty of resources to bite on. Try using frozen halves of banana or teething toys.
- Over-encouragement of kissing or mouthing can easily turn into a bite, so exert caution! Encourage snuggling-up as opposed to kissing if it has resulted in a bite.
- React promptly saying "No, that hurts". Talk directly to the biter, lower your tone, and put on a serious face but not angry. DO NOT LAUGH or else they may think it is an acceptable game.
- Hold the child to restrain if you have been able to intervene in time to prevent the bite. You must be firm yet sensitive because you do not want to model a different form of aggression.
- Avoid lengthy explanations of how and why biting is wrong. Younger children will not understand and older children will stop listening.
- Remind older children to 'use their words'
- Divert your attention to comfort the person who has been hurt, see below.

Be patient and prepared to respond calmly on every occasion. It will take time for a young child to fully understand the consequences of biting which from their point of view is a good strategy in the heat of the moment, especially when they do not have the language skills to articulate their feelings.

[CHILDREN LEARN BY REPEATING AND MAKING CONNECTIONS. THIS MEANS THEY OFTEN REPEAT BEHAVIOURS (INCLUDING BITING) IN ORDER TO TRY TO UNDERSTAND WHAT HAPPENS, AND WHY IT CAUSES SUCH REACTIONS]

What to avoid

Avoid creating a drama from the incident. Deal with it sensitively at the time and do not revisit this by 'telling off' the child at a later time. We do not recommend time-out, only in exceptional circumstances and only when a child is old enough to understand ie. over-three. If fierce emotions have not calmed, and you are unable to trust the child not to bite again, then the child may need a short period of time to calm down before rejoining the play but always remain friendly and stay close by continuing whatever you are doing together. We do not advocate the use of 'naughty' chairs or the threat of withdrawing a 'treat'.

Children who develop a habit of biting are soon not welcome as a playmate. It is important that the child understands that it is not the child we dislike, it is the biting behaviour that is unacceptable. It is also important that we do not 'label' a child as this can affect them for a very long time.

With biting at any age, be it with an under-two experimental biting or any older child, the adults need to be alert to the pattern of what is happening. Is the child tired or hungry? Is the child teething? Does it happen at similar times of the day? Does the child find some routines difficult? Is the child trying to be heard or noticed? Is the child unable to deal with other children joining in their play, wanting to share toys or turn-take? Is the child feeling crowded? Is the child frustrated at events out of their control?

The child who has been bitten

- Comfort the person who has been bitten.
- Deal with any injury
- Model gentleness by perhaps stroking the area that has been bitten saying “be gentle”.
- With older children (over-threes), invite the child (do not force) who inflicted the hurt to consider “How can you make things better?”. This is a more effective response than insisting a child says sorry which may shame them, you might apologise on their behalf eg ‘I’m sorry that ‘...’ hurt you, I know that when ‘...’ calms down he/she will be sorry to have hurt you’ and you can give them a gentle hug. This way you can help the perpetrator to display tenderness whilst helping the victim to display understanding and not react aggressively.
- Teach recipients of aggression how to negotiate with rather than to reject the aggressor.
- At nursery an accident form will be completed and you will be informed. However please respect the fact that we are unable to divulge the name of the child who bit. Staff aim to work with the relevant parents implementing strategies. Again respecting the anonymity of any victim.
- We will have dealt with the incident at the time - Please do not make a big issue of it with the child by asking them to recall after they have moved on from the happening.

Please be confident to inform staff if your child has bitten at home; it is imperative that parents, grandparents and staff all work together to ensure consistency in our dealings with biting, both with a child that may bite or a child that may have been bitten.