

A sensitive issue: Biting in child care

by Anne Stonehouse

Biting is a behaviour in young children that often causes great concern for both families and child care professionals. However, because biting tends to go along with group care for very young children, it can be quite common in child care centres and family day care homes for one child or several children to go through a period of biting others. It usually creates challenges for child care professionals, families and the children themselves – both those who bite and those who are bitten.

This article gives an overview of some of the common reasons for young children biting, and explores a range of practical strategies for managing and reducing biting incidents and ways to address families' concerns.

Child care professionals play an important role in minimising the likelihood and opportunities for biting to occur, and managing those that do occur positively and in the best interests of all children involved. They are also responsible for dealing with families' reactions and ensuring that they are supported positively when their child either bites or is bitten.

The family of a child who has been bitten will usually worry about their child's wellbeing. They can also sometimes feel anger toward the child who has bitten their child and/or toward the child's family due to a belief that biting behaviour is a reflection of poor parenting. The family may also be concerned that the child care professionals at the service have not protected

This article relates to:

FDCQA Principles: 1.1 – 1.3, 3.1 – 3.4 and 4.3

QIAS Principles: 1.1 – 1.4, 2.1, 2.2, 4.2 and 5.2

their child from being bitten.

Families of children who bite others often feel embarrassment, guilt and concern that their child's behaviour is not normal. Having a child who bites can be particularly difficult for families who are new to child care and who may not have previously experienced some of the common issues that can arise when children are in a group care situation. Having a child in the group who bites others can also obviously cause stress for other children in the group, and the child who bites usually also experiences anxiety.

Why do young children sometimes bite others?

Biting is common among some babies and toddlers, but not so common among children aged over three years. It occurs as a natural part of some children's development and, if handled well, will have no long lasting effects. There are many reasons that young children bite, and it is often hard to pin down a specific reason when a particular child bites. Some of the common reasons or triggers for biting behaviour are outlined below:

- Teething may increase a baby's urge to bite, as applying pressure to the gums may be comforting
- Babies explore everything around them, both objects and people, with all their senses. This includes exploring with the mouth, and sometimes this exploration turns into a bite
- Biting may be the result of impulsivity or lack of self-control. Some toddlers bite simply because there is someone close by. Sometimes physical closeness with another person turns into an unintentional bite
- Young children like and need to make things happen, to create an effect. Unfortunately they may discover that there is usually a big reaction to biting. Similarly, young children need adults' attention. In a busy child care setting, where children feel ignored or when they are bored, they may figure out that a good way



to get attention is to do something that is not acceptable. Young children sometimes seem to operate with the idea that negative attention is better than no attention at all

- Excitement and overstimulation often create tension and excess energy. Some children deal with this by biting or otherwise getting 'out of control'
- Even in the most child-centred environments young children can experience a lot of frustration. For example, before they can communicate well in words, not being able to make themselves understood is frustrating. Other sources of frustration are being in too small a space with too many children for long periods of time or having their play constantly interrupted
- Children who are faced with too many challenges and pressures, such as inappropriate expectations for their behaviour, may bite. Having access only to play materials and equipment that are too challenging may result in biting through frustration
- Children may bite when they are unwell or tired, especially before rest or sleep time and at the end of the day
- Children imitate other children, so one child biting can quickly lead to several children biting.

Keep in mind that young children do not appreciate how much biting hurts and that they are not biting willfully, with conscious intent. Children over three will usually have a greater understanding of how hurtful and inappropriate biting is. Generally children over three have greater self-control and the ability to stop themselves from impulsive behaviour. Their more highly developed communication skills mean that they have a range of more acceptable ways of communicating frustration or anger.

Responding to children's biting

Child care professionals should communicate consistently, clearly and powerfully to children that biting is never acceptable. Their manner and tone of voice can convey to even very young children that what they have done is strongly disapproved of.

Responses to biting will vary according to whether the child who bites is a baby, a toddler, or an older child. Some specific ways to deal with biting are discussed below:

- If teething is a possible cause of biting, offer an object to bite, such as a teething toy



- Try to ensure that there are moments of peace and quiet and not too much stimulation, especially for children who are particularly sensitive to how much is going on around them. Some children can become easily overstimulated and out of control and will need help to calm down and to get back in control
- A child who bites will need your attention as well as the child who has been bitten, but avoid responding to the child who has bitten in ways that may be interpreted as rewarding the behaviour
- Remove the child who has bitten from the situation. Teach them alternative strategies to biting as a way of getting something or expressing frustration and anger
- Look closely at the context when biting happens to get clues about what might be causing it – frustration, crowding, boredom, too much structure, inadequate adult attention or supervision
- Change the environment or the pace and variety in the program if this may be contributing to biting, but avoid making too many changes at the same time
- Give positive attention when children are behaving in ways that are appropriate
- Spend time with children to support them to learn positive social and communication skills.

Keep in mind that the best way to deal with biting is to aim to prevent it, although this will not always be possible.

Remember that making children say they are sorry is likely to be meaningless unless they understand what the words mean and actually



feel remorseful.

Although biting passes with most children, occasionally it persists for a long time. If this happens, and you have made every effort to deal with it, then it may be necessary to discuss with the family whether or not the care situation is working for the child and to consider alternatives. It is important for professionals to keep in mind how hard this will be for families. Sensitivity and support are required.

Communicating with families about biting

Clear, respectful communication with families, working sensitively with them and showing empathy are essential when biting occurs.

Partnerships require open communication with families about their child's experience.

When talking to the family of a child who bites, ensure that you convey the message that it is a common behaviour, that you want to discuss with them ways of managing it, and that it is not a sign that the parents have failed and should

feel responsible. Whether the child is only biting in child care or more generally, working with families will lead to the best results. Most importantly, let parents know that you take responsibility for what happens in child care and that it is not anyone's fault.

When talking to families of children who have been bitten, appreciate that it is not a consolation to tell them that biting is common in group care. Show them that you understand that they are upset by the incident, and reassure them that you are doing your best to deal with the issue. Say no to parents' requests to know who has bitten their child, as sharing this information serves no constructive purpose and is a betrayal of confidentiality.

Because biting is a likely occurrence when young children are in groups, it may be useful to talk with families when they enrol their child about the possibility that their child may bite or be bitten and the how the service works to minimise and deal with biting.

Conclusion

While there are positive steps to take to minimise biting and its effects, there are no magic solutions to keep it from happening or to get rid of it once it does occur. Biting tests the professionalism, skills and sensitivities of child care professionals. It also tests the strength of respectful partnerships with children and families, and requires a collaborative approach to promote the best outcomes for all concerned ■

This article relates to EYLF Learning Outcome 1: Children have a strong sense of identity

References and further reading

- Greenman, J., Stonehouse, A., & Schweikert, G. (2008). Prime times – A Handbook of Excellence in Infant and Toddler Programs (2nd ed.). St. Paul, Minnesota: Redleaf Press.
- Kinnell, G. (2002). No Biting – Policy and Practice for Toddler Programs. Castle Hill, NSW: Pademelon Press
- National Childcare Accreditation Council. (2008). NCAC Factsheet for Families – Biting in Child Care, Retrieved 3 February, 2010, from <http://www.ncac.gov.au/factsheets/biting.pdf>

Useful websites

- Child and Youth Health: www.cyh.com
- Raising Children Network: www.raisingchildren.net.au