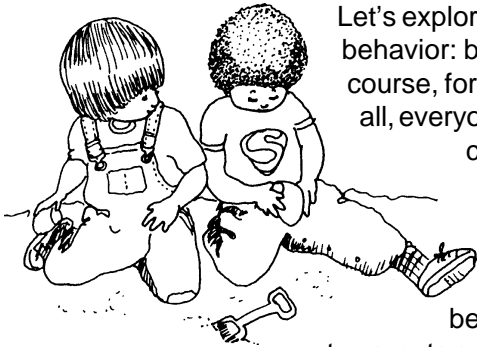


BANANAS HANDOUT

“No Bites!”

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Let's explore a common toddler behavior: biting. It is normal, of course, for babies to bite. After all, everyone learns to bite and chew food! However, it is a different story when youngsters bite other children. This kind of behavior is shocking to parents and caregivers alike –

and painful to the biting victim. “No Bites” gives practical suggestions on how to react when this happens at home or in a child care program.

It is understandable that some children bite to release stress or frustration. Mouths automatically react to emotions. When we are under stress, our jaw muscles are among the first to get tense. But, when children bite *other people*, not just their toys and food, the behavior needs to be addressed. Research shows that such biting is “normal,” or expected behavior, for the 10% to 15% of children who are born with emotionally intense temperaments. (Biters

may have other inborn temperament traits, including a very sensitive body, shyness in new situations and difficulty with both unexpected changes and routine transitions.) For children who are emotionally intense, all feelings are strong; there are no small events in their lives. Everything is either wonderful or terrible. Furthermore, because of their strong emotions, their jaws also react strongly, whether they feel happy or upset. Parents of such children sometimes report that even a loving hug or a kiss can end up leaving teeth marks, because the child gets so excited by the joy of being close.

Not surprisingly, intense children are especially inclined to bite before they can talk – before they can use words to express their strong feelings. Because their feelings are so intense, these children may be three years old or even older before they get their instinctive biting completely under control. Caregivers, be they parents or child care providers, need to show biters alternative ways to deal with intense feelings. First and foremost, carefully observe the biter. Try to identify when and why the biting happens. Once you find a behavior pattern, use the chart below to develop a response.

Reasons for Biting	Ways to Help
Teething Exploration Jaw exercise (oral stimulation)	Provide teething rings or an apple piece tied in a piece of cloth, etc. (first put apple in the refrigerator, <i>not the freezer</i> , to make more soothing). Provide rubber spatulas and rubber toys to bite. Tie a bracelet of rubber tubing around the child's wrist or use a special, soft whistle (www.chewytubes.com or (207) 741-2443). Teach “lick it, don't bite it” for less sturdy objects. When the child is calm, practice appropriate biting: “Let's practice biting things that are OK to bite. Can we bite this ...?”
Release physical energy	Provide lots of big muscle play, such as running, climbing, riding tricycles, hammering, playdough, etc.
Excited affection/social contact	Teach gentle touching. Say “hug and hum” (to keep that mouth busy!). Remove and redirect.
To get needed attention	Give adequate one-on-one attention before biting occurs.
	See “More Ways to Help” on the next page.

More Ways to Help

- **Give more space** – Biters are often children who need a little extra personal space. Help them find a quiet corner away from kid traffic where they can be alone when their feelings run high. Help all the children put their arms straight out to show a “bubble” of personal space. “When others want space, we give them at least this much space.”
- **Encourage using words** – role play: “I’ll pretend to take your toy. You tell me “NO!”
- **“Shadow” the biter** – whether in child care, at home or in other group settings, shadowing is labor intensive, but well worth it. Follow the child for a full day, *saying everything you think s/he might be feeling, and what actions might be taken*: For example: “Jason is in your space. You’re feeling crowded. You could go somewhere else, or say “Jason, please move.”
- **Note who the usual victim (or victims) are** – usually the biter selects just one or two children. Once you know the pattern, you can “shadow” only when the biter approaches the usual victims. Teach the victims to be assertive: Pretend the biter is nearby. Practice saying firmly, “No bites!” (see “True Biting Tales”).
- **Make up stories about animals and children** who want to bite but instead make better choices about how to use their mouths.
- **Use rewards and consequences for three and four-year-olds**, such as some special time together for getting through a day without biting (see “True Tales”).

What To Do When a Child Does Bite

- **Act calmly.** *Never* bite the biter back. This would only show children that adults lose control too, or that it’s okay to bite.
- **Take care of the victim first.** Calm the child. Then wash the bite well.
- **Create distance:** set the child who bit down if you were bitten, or separate the biter from the victim.
- **Point out the effect of biting:** “See, Nasir is crying because biting hurts.” Encourage the biter to comfort the victim. Teach gentle touching and comforting.
- **Ask the biter for ideas to avoid biting:** Ask “When you feel like biting, Tamaya, what can you do instead? That’s right, you can use your words. Are you ready to play now, and not bite any children?”

For Child Care Providers

– Talking With The Biter’s Parents:

- Ask whether the child bites at home or elsewhere.
- Jointly review “Reasons for Biting” and “Ways to Help.”
- Agree on an action plan to be used at child care and at home in order to get faster results.
- Don’t expect parents to fix the problem. Providers and parents need to work together to stop the biting.

– Talking With The Victim’s Parents:

- Have the victim’s parents notify their child’s doctor if the skin was broken.
- Let them know you understand their distress.
- Reassure them that, to avoid recurrence, you are watching closely and working with the biter. Follow through.
- Ask them to build their child’s assertiveness by encouraging their child to practice saying firmly, “No bites!”
- Inform them that, because of confidentiality, you cannot tell them the name of the biter.

For Parents

– **Of Children Who Bite:** It’s common for parents to feel guilty if their child bites another child. Another common reaction is for parents to feel angry at their child for hurting others. Remember, just as some children take longer to learn enough body control to ride a tricycle or to cut with scissors, some children take longer to control their teeth. While they’re learning, they need our patient, firm teaching, not anger.

– **Of Children Who Are Bitten:** Parents of biting victims often feel angry at the caregiver of the child doing the biting. That’s understandable, given that *your child got hurt* and especially if it happens more than once. But, remember, parents and caregivers usually feel badly also.

- If the biting happened in child care, talk to the child care provider about your concerns for your child’s safety and jointly review “Reasons for Biting” and “Ways to Help.”
- Agree on an action plan to be used at child care.
- Teach your child to firmly say “No Biting!” in threatening situations.

True Biting Tales

Shelly’s mother was at her wits’ end because of Shelly’s repeated biting at child care. Finally she told Shelly (age three): “When you bite someone, we’ll have to send your favorite Barney toy home with that child for the night to help him or her feel better.”

When Shelly missed her Barney toy, Mom asked: “Why isn’t Barney here tonight? How can you make sure Barney comes home tomorrow?” After biting three more times over the next several weeks, Shelly finally got her teeth under control.

Sue felt like “someone stabbed her in the heart” when her 18-month-old daughter got bitten for the second time in child care. Sue voiced her concerns with the teacher and program director, who promised to better watch the biter (age two). When the same child bit Jasmine *again*, Sue was ready to pull her out of the program.

But Sue gave it one more try: she taught Jasmine to yell “No Biting!!!” whenever a conflict beckoned with the biter. That put an end to the biting. And, the two children ended up being best friends.