



Understanding and Addressing Biting: A Parent's Guide

If your child has ever been bitten by a peer at preschool, or if you've received news that your child has bitten another, it can be both confusing and distressing. Biting is a common behavior in young children, especially in preschool and early childhood settings. While it may seem alarming at first, it's important to recognize that biting is not typically a sign of aggression or a behavior problem. Instead, it is often a natural part of a child's emotional and social development. In this article, we'll explore why young children bite, how it's handled in a Montessori setting, and what you can do when your child is either the biter or the one being bitten.

Why Do Young Children Bite?

Children, particularly in the preschool years, are still developing the language and emotional regulation skills necessary to express themselves effectively. Biting, in many cases, is a way for children to communicate their needs or emotions when they don't yet have the words to do so. Here are some of the most common reasons why preschoolers bite:

1. **Frustration or Overwhelm:** Young children can become easily frustrated, especially when they feel overwhelmed or unable to communicate their feelings. For example, a child who is frustrated with a difficult task, doesn't get their turn with a toy, or feels emotionally overwhelmed may resort to biting as an outlet.
2. **Sensory Exploration:** For some children, biting can be a sensory experience. They may bite out of curiosity, particularly when they are feeling sensory input, like the texture of something (e.g., their own or someone else's skin). This is more common in younger toddlers, who are still exploring their world through physical actions. Children with sensory processing issues may seek out tactile experiences, which can sometimes include biting.
3. **Seeking Attention:** Some children bite in order to get attention, whether it's from a teacher, their peers, or even themselves. They may have learned that biting results in a response, such as being noticed or getting attention, which reinforces the behavior.
4. **Imitating Others:** Children often model behaviors they observe, so a child who sees another child biting might imitate this behavior, especially if it leads to a reaction, whether positive or negative. This is especially true in group settings, where behaviors are observed and copied quickly.
5. **Difficulty Managing Emotions:** Emotional regulation is a skill that children are still developing. A child who is feeling angry, anxious, or overwhelmed may not yet have the emotional tools to express themselves in a more appropriate way, leading them to bite as a means of expressing or releasing those emotions.

6. **Exploring Boundaries:** Young children are learning about social boundaries, and sometimes they bite because they don't understand the impact their actions have on others. They might not realize that biting hurts or that it can make another child feel upset.
7. **Sensory Processing Disorder:** For some children, biting may be linked to a sensory processing disorder (SPD). SPD is a condition where the brain has difficulty receiving and responding to sensory information. Children with SPD may chew or bite objects (including people) as a way of self-soothing or seeking the sensory input they crave. In such cases, biting is often less about communication or emotional frustration and more about the child's sensory needs.

How Biting Is Handled in a Montessori Setting

At a Montessori school, the approach to handling biting focuses on understanding the underlying causes and providing both immediate support and long-term strategies. Here's how biting is typically addressed in a Montessori setting:

1. **Immediate Intervention:** When a bite occurs, the first priority is to attend to the child who has been bitten, providing comfort and care for any injury. The adult will reassure the child that they are safe, check for injury, and guide them in expressing their feelings (e.g., "I know that hurt. Are you okay? Let's take a deep breath together."). The biter will be gently removed from the situation, but not in a punitive way.
2. **Calm, Non-Punitive Response:** Montessori classrooms strive to create an environment of trust and understanding. In these situations, the adult will calmly explain to the child who bit why biting is not acceptable and help them reflect on their actions. For example: "Biting hurts. We use our words to tell others what we need, not our teeth." It's important that this conversation is done calmly without shaming the child. The goal is to help the child understand their actions, not punish them.
3. **Emotional Guidance:** One of the key tenets of Montessori education is emotional regulation, and it's particularly important in handling biting. Teachers will work with children to help them learn how to express their emotions, frustrations, or needs in more appropriate ways, such as using words, breathing techniques, or simple physical activities like jumping or squeezing a stress ball. These coping mechanisms are often introduced and practiced long before a biting incident occurs.
4. **Reinforcing Empathy:** When a child bites, it's essential to help them understand the impact of their actions on others. Teachers will model empathy by encouraging the child to check on the child they've bitten and express care for them. This helps the child begin to understand how their actions affect others and how they can repair relationships.
5. **Creating a Calm, Predictable Environment:** In a Montessori setting, the environment is carefully prepared to reduce overstimulation and stress. Teachers are trained to recognize when a child may be getting overwhelmed and to intervene early. When children are provided with a calm, predictable environment, there are fewer opportunities for stress-induced behaviors like biting.

What to Do When Your Child Is the Biter

If your child has bitten another child, it's important to approach the situation with understanding and support. Here's how you can respond:

1. **Stay Calm:** While it's natural to feel embarrassed or upset, try to stay calm when you first hear about the incident. Children take cues from their caregivers, and if they see that you remain composed, it will help them feel secure as you work through the situation together.
2. **Talk to Your Child:** Gently talk to your child about what happened. Use age-appropriate language to help them understand why biting is not acceptable. You can explain that biting hurts and makes people feel sad, and offer alternative ways for your child to express their feelings or needs.
3. **Teach Alternative Behaviors:** Work with your child to develop alternative, non-violent ways of communicating. Role-play situations where your child may feel frustrated or upset, and practice how they can use their words or ask for help instead of resorting to biting.
4. **Look for Triggers:** Pay attention to whether certain situations, environments, or emotions seem to trigger biting behavior. For example, does your child tend to bite when they're tired, hungry, overstimulated, or anxious? By identifying these triggers, you can help your child avoid situations that might lead to biting and provide them with tools to cope.
5. **Collaborate with Teachers:** Your child's teacher can provide valuable insights into the behavior. Work together to develop a plan that supports your child in managing their emotions and finding better ways to communicate. If sensory needs are contributing to the biting, teachers may help identify strategies to address these needs in the classroom, such as providing fidget tools or incorporating sensory breaks.
6. **Consider Sensory Processing Needs:** If you suspect that your child's biting may be related to sensory processing challenges, consider consulting an occupational therapist who specializes in sensory integration. An OT can assess your child's sensory needs and offer strategies to help manage behaviors like biting, such as providing sensory-rich activities or teaching self-regulation techniques.

What to Do When Your Child Has Been Bitten

If your child has been bitten, it's essential to provide comfort and reassurance:

1. **Address Immediate Needs:** Calmly assess whether your child has been injured and provide any necessary first aid. Let them know that they are safe and help them process their feelings. It's okay for your child to feel upset, and it's important to validate their emotions.
2. **Talk About the Incident:** Gently discuss what happened in an age-appropriate way. Explain that sometimes children get upset and may not know how to express their feelings, but that it's important to always be kind and gentle with others. Reassure your child that they did nothing wrong and that the situation will be handled.

3. **Monitor Emotional Responses:** After the incident, some children may feel anxious about interacting with the biter. Give your child time to talk about their feelings and offer support as they process the event. Reassure them that their feelings are normal and that they are always safe in the classroom and can go to the teacher for support.
4. **Communicate with Teachers:** If your child has been bitten, communicate with the teacher to understand what happened and how it was handled. Teachers will be able to give you insights into how your child is coping with the situation and any strategies they are using to help manage behavior in the classroom.

Resources for Parents

- **"The Explosive Child"** by Ross Greene: A resource for understanding how to address challenging behavior in children, especially those who struggle with emotional regulation.
- **"Sensational Kids: Hope and Help for Children with Sensory Processing Disorder"** by Lucy Jane Miller: A guide to understanding and supporting children with sensory processing issues.
- **Zero to Three** – A nonprofit organization providing resources on child development and behavior (www.zerotothree.org)