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Helpful Responses to Tough Behaviors: Biting

Posted on [September 5, 2012](http://abundantlifechildren.com/2012/09/05/helpful-responses-to-tough-behaviors-biting/) by [Emily Plank, Abundant Life Children](http://abundantlifechildren.com/author/abundantlifechildren/)



Water play provides an outlet for children with building emotional energy

Biting is an interesting choice for a needs-meeting tool.  Consider the explosive reaction biting elicits from the victim or the immediate and strong response from adults.  Educators and parents fear the wild teeth of a young child because teeth can do more damage than fists or feet, or because teeth can cause a break in the skin which requires a visit to the doctor, or simply because biting is wild and a bit animalistic.  For any number of reasons, biting seems to elicit a stronger response than most other anti-social behaviors.  And, at the same time, it is so common!

Somehow, we need to place biting back on the same shelf with other strong behaviors, and align our responses with the developmental nature of the behavior.  If children had another way to meet their needs, they would use it – so let’s give them one.  They feel as overpowered by their strong emotions as we feel powerless to respond effectively.  If we remain consistent and firm while also controlling our urge to meet their strength with our strength, we can be a source of safety for our children who feel out of control.

Children bite for all kinds of reasons: teething, frustration, over-stimulation, boredom, a sense of powerlessness, attempting to meet needs (especially when a child lacks verbal skills to get needs met), and on and on.  **The biggest obstacle to responding helpfully when a child bites is to not identify the need under the behavior.**

We can start with some simple observation and documentation to keep track of answers to the following questions:

* What happens just before the bite?
* Is it the same impetus all the time?
* Does the child always bite the same person?

Based on these observations, we can move to responding helpfully.

**Biting in very young children (from birth to age 1):** Very young children often bite because they are teething.  When they do, they need a consistent script from us.  “Teeth hurt.  Bite this teether instead of me.”  Sometimes, young children are interested in the great and loud response they can cause with their teeth.  Again, providing a consistent script will help children learn over time.  “Teeth hurt people. You can’t bite me, but you can bite this toy.”  The more calm and predictable our response, the more effective.



Prolonged, unstructured play in nature and time to play alone helps to counter the kinds of feelings that lead to challenging behaviors in young children.

**Biting as a way of meeting needs.**  This child consistently bites when they want something, or when they have something taken away from them.  Often, these children are under age 3 and lack strong vocabulary skills to advocate for themselves.  My script is something like this: *I can see you want that toy. Biting doesn’t work.  If you bite, you won’t get to use the toy.  If you want the toy, ask your friend, ‘Please can I have it?*‘ I teach non-verbal babies and toddlers a sign so they can meet their needs without resorting to physical aggression.  (The sign is a palm out facing up with the pointer finger of the other hand pointing to the empty palm.)   I role-play the process of “please can I have it’ over and over with older kids and younger kids paired up. When we see Desmond coming for a toy, I will prepare the older ones.  *It looks like Desmond might want that toy.  Let’s help him learn that asking works.  Do you want to help me?*

**Biting as a sign of powerlessness.**  Think of how powerful it would feel to sink your teeth into someone else and get that big strong reaction!  If a child bites after enduring a morning of “Get up.  Put these clothes on.  Get in the car. Pull your pants up.” – they might be looking for some power.  Find ways to give these children a sense of power and control at other times during the day.  Here are some easy way to help children feel powerful.

* Build a giant tower and knock it over (empty cereal boxes are great for big tall towers that won’t hurt tumbling down).
* Climb to a tall place in the room and look down on everything else from above
* Use a loud voice – paper towel tubes will amplify the volume, increasing the effect.
* Give meaningful choices – what to wear, what music you will listen to, what vegetable the family will have for dinner, which seat to sit in at the table



Helping a child who is over-stimulated\*

**Biting as a sign of over-stimulation.**   As an introvert, I can empathize with children who spend their whole days in close proximity to other children.  Children who are over-stimulated will often bite when the noise level gets high, or after a full morning of whole group play.  These children need [private spaces and time to play alone](http://abundantlifechildren.com/2012/03/07/centering/) in order to re-energize.  Here are some ideas:

* Give ample sensory play time – water play (even wasteful hand-washing time with some measuring spoons), play dough, sand play
* Walk barefoot through a bucket of flour or sand
* Go outside!  Children who have prolonged, unstructured play in nature have many opportunities to unload building emotional energy
* Make an enormous batch of play dough and let him use his elbows and knees to shape it
* Noise-cancelling earmuffs make a huge difference in our program.  Children who are on overload will put on a set at anytime of the day.  We frequently have crew members at the meal table with earmuffs on to block some of the noise.
* Find a small space (under a table, behind a couch, etc, and make a private space for children to go when they start to feel overwhelmed.
* Use a small exercise trampoline or a crib mattress on the floor for some large muscle relief.

**Biting as a cry for connection.**  Sometimes children need physical contact time with us and don’t have a way to ask for that time.  If I sense children are out of sorts, I will load some connection time into our day: reading books together, snuggling, singing, building a tower together, etc.  Often, biting is a cry for connection through larger big body movements.  Think about engaging with children in these large motor ways: playing with a large parachute, doing some big body painting (barefoot in the grass on some large butcher paper), kicking a ball in a field, running together, or jumping on a mattress.

Later in the week, I will write about how to helpfully respond to those who are wounded when biting happens and how to follow up with both the aggressor and the victim.  Hint: [there will be no punishing](http://abundantlifechildren.com/2012/07/30/how-to-raise-decent-children-without-spankings-or-time-outs/).  Stay tuned!

*\* This picture was staged.  While children with ear muffs at the snack table is far from rare at Abundant Life, I also don’t think that photographing children in their overwhelmed moments is typically a respectful thing to do.  But, I want to you behold the awesomeness of the ear muffs!  I had a willing helper.*

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What To Do When Children Bite (Part 2)

Posted on [November 19, 2013](http://abundantlifechildren.com/2013/11/19/what-to-do-when-children-bite-part-2/) by [Emily Plank, Abundant Life Children](http://abundantlifechildren.com/author/abundantlifechildren/)



*Wait? There was a part 1?*[*Yes – on September 5, 2012*](http://abundantlifechildren.com/2012/09/05/helpful-responses-to-tough-behaviors-biting/)*.  I occasionally forget to finish my blog-thoughts.  Thanks to a reader for pushing me onward to part 2!*

As our children grow, we hope to nurture them into assertive adults.  Children who act aggressively need support to temper that aggression.  Children who are victims need support to verbalize their needs and stand up for their rights for physical and emotional safety.

Here are some lessons I have learned from [my mentors and wise educators](http://abundantlifechildren.com/2012/08/29/my-10-most-influential-people/)about how to help:

1. **Refrain from judgment.** Instead, use language that helps children understand the complex feelings of everyone involved.
2. **Don’t teach while children are upset.** In the middle of the meltdown, it is not the time to chide anyone about the need for “gentle teeth” or “using our words.”  When emotions run high, the brain is in fight-or-flight mode, and [cannot accommodate new information](http://parentingfromscratch.wordpress.com/2012/09/11/flipping-our-lids-and-closing-them-again/).  Those conversations are very important to havewhen a child is calm.  I initiate conversations about emotional regulation with groups of children over meals or during gathering time.  Our family discusses these things during our weekly family meetings.  Conversations about strong emotions might might sound like this:*Do you know what I do when I’m angry?  Sometimes I feel like breaking things.  Instead, I like to kick pillows.  It feels good to let my energy out.  What do you do when you’re angry?*
3. **Give language to the children involved.**  Children need scripts to tell their peers how they feel.  Without our modeling, they lack the specific language tools to communicate their feelings.
4. **Keep in mind that the biting is only the outward expression of the inward need.** Until we help children learn different ways to get their needs met, they will continue to bite (or hit, kick, etc.).  For ideas on what could be going on inside the mind of the biter, [check out this article](http://abundantlifechildren.com/2012/09/05/helpful-responses-to-tough-behaviors-biting/).

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*Consider this scenario: Two children are engaged in play.  One (Lucy) takes a toy from another (Max).  Out of anger and a strong need to have her toy returned, Max bites Lucy.  Lucy is crying.*

Adult: “Lucy – you look sad.”
Lucy: “Max bit me!”
Adult: “Did you want him to bite you?”
Lucy: “No!”
Adult: “Tell him, ‘Don’t bite me!’”
Lucy: (to Max) “Don’t bite me!”
Max: “She took my block away!”
Adult: “That made you angry.  Biting hurts.  Let’s ask Lucy what would help.” (to Lucy) “What would help?”
Lucy: “Ice.”
Adult: (to Max) “Let’s go get Lucy some ice.”  (as the ice is being applied)  “Max, you can tell Lucy with words when you aren’t done with a toy, or you can ask me for help getting it back, but biting won’t work to get your toys back.  Biting hurts.”

**Important features of this exchange:**

1.  The children voice their needs, with support of the adult. The *You look sad* at the beginning serves as an invitation for Lucy to reflect on how she is feeling and verbalize it.

2.  There are [no forced apologies](http://www.janetlansbury.com/2009/12/youll-be-sorry/), but children are invited to participate in the process of making amends.  Through participating in the restitution process (providing ice), they find that [they have the power](http://abundantlifechildren.com/2012/03/16/i-am-powerful/) to mend a relationship when it has been broken.  The [greatest phrase I ever learned](http://abundantlifechildren.com/2012/10/05/phrases-that-nurture-respect-confidence-and-community/) for this process is, “What would be helpful?” (said to the wounded child).  With practice, children learn to identify their self-care needs.

3.  We reflect the child’s inner feelings with our language.  “That made you angry.”  “You look sad.”  — these phrases help a child begin to articulate how they feel inside.

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*Consider a similar scenario with pre-verbal children.  15-month-old Emma is very happy to see her cousin, Danny.  She bites him on the arm.  This is common for Emma; biting when she is excited releases the strong emotions she feels as well as offers a point of physical contact with her cousin.  Danny is crying and hurt.*

Adult: (calmly, matter-of-factly) “Emma.  Look at Danny’s face.  He is crying.  You bit him with your teeth.  It hurt.  Danny, tell Emma, ‘No!’ [signaled with a hand sign for 'no']  Emma, if you want to say ‘Hi’ to Danny, hold out your arms so he knows you want a hug.”

**Important features of this exchange:**

1. Body language is important with pre-verbal children.  Positioning ourselves on the same level with the children and using hand gestures to communicate helps them find agency in a verbal world.

2.  This can appear to be a lot of language to use with children who don’t yet talk.  Keeping sentences short and pausing between thoughts can help children process what they are hearing.

3.  Often, children aren’t even aware of how their actions impacted another child.  Telling Emma that her teeth were responsible for Danny’s tears helps her connect her actions with the consequences.

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