

# From a Parent's Perspective

by Roslyn Duffy



## — Situation —

*My daughter just turned 16 months old. Last week she bit two children at her child care. She seems to bite when she is frustrated. I am afraid she will be kicked out of child care if her biting continues. How can I stop her from biting? My mother says to bite her back, but that seems crazy to me. Her dad says a spanking will grab her attention, but I really don't want to hit her. Time out doesn't seem to have any effect. The problem is I don't know what else to do.*

Roslyn Duffy is the co-author with Jane Nelsen and Cheryl Erwin of *Positive Discipline for Preschoolers* and *Positive Discipline: The First Three Years* (Prima Press) and co-author with Jane Nelsen of *My First Visit to Preschool* (Fisher-Price). She is a 17-year veteran director of a child care program in Seattle, Washington, lectures and teaches classes for both parents and teachers, and is a counselor in private practice. She has four children of her own.

## — Solution —

Biting raises many strong emotions. When the subject of biting comes up, parents glance away uneasily and child care directors get a concerned look. We feel awful when a little one turns tear-filled eyes towards us while holding up an arm marked with an unmistakable red welt.

There seem to be two categories of biting. The largest consists of biting that occurs from about 14 months to 3 years of age. The second category sweeps together biting which occurs from the late preschool years onward.

In the first instance, biting corresponds to developmental stages. It is this first type of biting that will be addressed in the remainder of this article.

When older children bite, the reasons relate to many factors: delays in impulse control, environmental conditions, and inadequate social skills. This second type of biting has lots more variables. I encourage families with older biters to seek additional help. Be sure to include a speech and hearing evaluation for children still biting after about 3 or 3½ years of age.

Whatever the type of biting, one thing is certain: biting gets everyone's teeth gnashing.

*What problems do you experience? Send a description, a short word "snapshot" of the situation, to **From a Parent's Perspective**. Each month, we will address your real life issues. To assure confidentiality, names of those submitting problems will not appear. Elements of several problems may be combined for this column. Only situations appearing in the column receive responses.*

## A Developmental Stage

The good news is that your daughter will probably outgrow her biting quickly. The bad news is that it probably won't seem quickly enough.

Your wisdom exceeds Grandma's this time. Biting your daughter back will not teach her to quit biting. There will just be two of you biting instead of one.

Other tactics often suggested include washing a child's mouth out with soap or placing bitters or hot sauce on the tongue. These things can easily become abusive.

Your husband's spanking solution promises to create a new and even longer lasting problem. Today's research confirms that children who are hit learn to hit. Instead of biting, will your daughter move on to hitting? Bottom line: Spanking, biting back, or washing out a child's mouth with soap doesn't eliminate biting.

There are no quick fixes to stop children from biting. There are several things that will help.

## Language Development and Training

Early biting usually relates to language development. A child can't say she is upset: she bites instead. She might feel angry, tired, or sad, but she does not know how to tell one feeling from another. Teach her words to describe her feelings.

At story-time, talk about what the characters in the book might be feeling. "This one looks very tired. What does it feel like to be tired?"

Have you ever felt tired? Remember how your eyes start to close sometimes? That is what 'tired' feels like."

Another way to teach about feelings is to talk about Teddy Bear and how he might act when he feels angry, or how a doll or plastic toy figure might feel when her mommy goes to work in the morning. "I'll bet she feels sad. Do you feel sad sometimes when Mommy goes to work?"

## Expect the Possible

Toddlers and very young children do not know how to share. Provide them with plenty of toys and supplies. Set out several sets of stacking blocks or as many glue sticks as there are children.

Keep interest level high. Rotate some of the toys in each area, or on a child's shelves at home, every two weeks. Change the type of beans or grains used for pouring activities, alter the color of the water for water play, or add new fabrics to the dress-up basket.

During her first three years, a child sees herself as the center of the universe. When she bites, she may feel upset about not getting a toy she wanted, confused and hurt about getting reprimanded, but she does not realize that her biting hurts the other person. Making her sit and "think about" her behavior is fruitless. She literally *cannot* think about things outside of her universe, which happens to consist of *herself*.

## Identify Biting Patterns

Gather clues. When, where, or whom does your daughter bite?

### ■ Is it . . .

- . . . a certain time of day?
- . . . a certain place?
- . . . a certain child or adult?

### ■ Is she . . .

- . . . sleepy?
- . . . hungry?
- . . . overstimulated?

If you can see a pattern, you can reduce the number of biting incidents by planning ahead.

Every time you take your daughter to the mall with you, she ends up biting. The mall is probably too stimulating for her. Shop without her.

The teacher might notice most biting occurs just before nap time. Allowing a child to stay inside helping set out nap mats and then lying down earlier might help her manage better.

## Supervision

There is not always a detectable pattern to biting. The most basic prevention is supervision.

- Be available to respond to her.
- Comment on her activity at frequent intervals.
- Make physical contact: hug her, stroke her arm, gently rub her back.

Supervision combined with the previous techniques should get most biting under sufficient control to allow center care to continue. Work with the center to help your daughter through this difficult time.

A really persistent biter would do well to function as the teacher's shadow. She becomes the teacher's helper, sits in the teacher's lap at group time, and spends the day working alongside the teacher. One ten-year plus veteran director of a toddler program says that she has never had to ask a biter to leave. She uses the strategies described throughout this article. A low adult-child ratio (1 to 5 for toddlers) may be necessary if the biting is excessive.

### *After the Bite*

In spite of the best planning, biting might continue. If the biting is related to development, only time will resolve it. The important key is to focus on improvement rather than perfection.

Angie and Tammy are playing in the dress-up corner. One second they are twirling in colored veils and the next Tammy is screaming, tugging her finger out of Angie's mouth.

Take a deep breath, then follow the steps outlined in the box on the left. *Remember that biting usually occurs because of a feeling a child cannot express. She probably already feels miserable.* Positive time out might help her calm down, but it won't eliminate biting. When we understand the child's perspective, then soothing her, responding compassionately, and helping her regain her composure makes sense.

For a more extensive look at biting, read the section on biting in the newly released *Positive Discipline: The First Three Years* by Jane Nelsen, Cheryl Erwin, and Roslyn Duffy (Prima Press, 1998).

### *What to Do After the Bite*

Follow three quick steps.

- Provide damage control.
- State clearly: "No Biting."
- Address the child's needs (both children).

Remove the biter so that she cannot continue to bite.

- Say firmly: "No Biting!"
- Offer comfort to the bitten child.
- Allow the biter to help soothe the child she has bitten. (Be sure to wash bites with soap and water.)
- Help the biter to calm down and offer her comfort as well.