

Biting and Other Aggressive Toddler Behaviors



It is normal for some toddlers to begin biting people or using other types of aggressive behaviors during their first or second year of life. While these behaviors are very stressful for everyone involved, they are no reflection on the parenting these children have had, nor an indication that these toddlers have a need for revenge or power or any other adverse motivation often attributed to them. Some children are very shy, some children are very sociable, some children are very active, and some children bite, kick, hit with objects, or grab other children's toys at this point in their development. Sometimes a child's stress or frustration may instigate these behaviors, due to an inability to communicate strong feelings, not being able to act out physical energy in other ways, or various other reasons.

Aggressive toddler behaviors may include biting a parent on hands, cheek, leg, etc.; biting other children, especially when frustrated; kicking while having diapers changed; hitting other children with objects such as toys; or grabbing toys away from other children repetitively. These behaviors usually result in a loud response from the parent, caregiver, or other children. This loud response, even when followed by some type of punishment, seems to be strongly reinforcing of the behavior, so that the behaviors are repeated often, and a vicious circle develops.

If these behaviors are self-reinforcing, what is a parent to do? Physical punishment is not recommended and isn't very effective. The Gesell Institute and many child care and parenting education programs advise that these behaviors be anticipated and steps taken to prevent them from happening again, once they have started. That is, the primary strategy should be one of *anticipation and prevention*.



To do this, the parent or caregiver must temporarily allocate more time to watching for the warning signs that the aggressive behavior is about to happen and preventing it. Sometimes it becomes clear what is preceding the aggression, and caregivers may intervene by teaching needed skills or redirecting the child to a different activity. This is hard work, but it usually only takes a few weeks of prevention before the child has forgotten how rewarding the behavior was, and has learned that the adults in charge will not allow it to happen.

Since it is difficult to make sure these behaviors don't happen even once, especially at first, a secondary strategy might include planning to respond when they do happen by paying attention to the victim, rather than the aggressor. If deprived of the loud response, many children will find the behaviors much less rewarding. If they are ignored at first and then experience age-appropriate logical consequences they don't like, the aggressive behavior is likely to disappear.

For example, when a parent forgets to keep a distance between the child's mouth and her own body and gets bitten, she should stay calm above all else, say "no biting" and deprive the child of her attention for a few minutes. When a caregiver isn't quick enough in anticipating and preventing a peer from getting bitten, he should pay immediate calm attention to the victim first, and only then calmly administer the consequence to the aggressor. An appropriate consequence might be having to play in another area by him or herself for 5 minutes, or taking a 2-minute time-out.

Sometimes the problem behavior occurs only in a particular setting or situation. In this case, it is often easiest to avoid this situation for several months to give the toddler time to grow out of the problem behavior. These behaviors are never easy on parents and caregivers but they can be resolved without violence.



By Rachel Ozretich, M.S., Certified Family Life Educator, 2000

Resources:

Ames, L.B., & Ilg, F.L. (1983). Your one-year-old. New York: Dell Publishing.
Fields, M.V., & Boesser, C. (1994). Constructive guidance and discipline. New York: Macmillan Publishing Company.