**Biting in Early Childhood Classrooms**

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**BACKGROUND:** *Biting* is a common early childhood behavior that often occurs between 4 months and three years of age. Young babies and toddlers may bite as a method of exploration or oral stimulation, to alleviate teething issues, or to explore cause and effect; older toddlers may bite out of frustration or stress. Although biting is normal, young children require support to find alternative, safe behaviors to replace biting (Ireland & Stein, 2008; Ramming, Kyger, & Thompson, 2006). We present three approaches for helping prevent and respond to biting, and provide an example involving Deon, a typically-developing two year old, who is sometimes prone to biting when frustrated.

1) **Focus on prevention.**
   - If biting happens often, look for patterns that seem to lead to biting.
   - Offer extra support in situations that lead to frustration, stress, fatigue, or social anxiety.
   - Provide crunchy or chewy snacks or high-texture items for children to bite for teething or oral stimulation.

2) **Respond proactively.**
   - Stay calm and intervene quickly to separate the children involved.
   - Respond immediately with a firm message letting the child know that biting is not acceptable.
   - Model empathy for the child who bit.
   - When the child who bit is calm, teach the child to use an alternative behavior to meet his needs.

3) **Adopt classroom and center-wide policies that address biting developmentally.**
   - Alert the families of all children involved, but do not identify a child who bit to another family.
   - Provide practical supports and interventions rather than excluding the child or removing them from the school.

**APPLICATION:** In the scenario below, Tavia, the classroom teacher, responds to a biting incident.

Deon toddles over to a group of friends reading a book on the sofa with Tavia. Deon snuggles in close to another child, Alex, and listens to the story happily. Once the story is over, Deon states “More book, please,” Tavia says, “The story is all done, let’s make another choice,” Deon shouts “No!” and bites Alex’s arm. Tavia quickly separates the two and calmly but firmly states, “We don’t bite, Deon.” Then comforts Alex, who is crying, saying “I am sorry you were bitten; I know how much being bit hurts.” Deon is crying, too; Tavia gives him a firm but nurturing message “I can see that you are frustrated because we are all done reading but it is not a choice to bite your friends. Deon, look at Alex, he is sad.”

Tavia continues to assist the bitten child, offering him a choice of an ice pack or wet cloth. Tavia invites Deon to participate in comforting Alex as a natural consequence: “Deon, can you give Alex a hug or pat on the back to help him feel better?” “Hug,” states Deon, and offers Alex a hug. Tavia watches carefully to make sure both children are calm, then says, “Deon I see you were sad, too, would you like a hug or pat?” As she comforts Deon, Tavia offers safe alternatives for biting, “I can help you with a teether or pacifier if you need to bite.”

Later in the day, Tavia suggests, “Deon let’s read a book about what we can use our teeth for.” She also writes an incident report and gives both children’s legal guardians a call to inform them of the incident.

**TO LEARN MORE:**
- Zero to Three
- National Association for the Education of Young Children

**REFERENCES:**