

When children bite and hit

Biting and hitting are commonplace behaviours in children, despite the fact they are not favourable or encouraged. Each behaviour has a purpose in a child's life, serving them in some way, despite the fact it can be difficult to identify what the child gets out of it, especially when the consequence of their actions get them into trouble. Getting children to stop biting and hitting can be quite a challenge and one fraught with ups and downs. As such, this article will explore the idea of biting and hitting and highlighting strategies to support children to stop.

A quick note to sprinkle some reality on the situation

Although it would be nice to pretend that there are strategies that will quickly and effectively stop children from biting and hitting, the simple truth of the matter is that eliminating these behaviours takes time and patience. The reasons that children bite and hit are varied, but usually relate back to the idea that children have not yet developed the skill to regulate their emotions and adopt more appropriate strategies to vent their frustrations, fears or disappointments.

The most common ages for biting and hitting

The most common ages for biting occur in young children who are typically classed as infants and toddlers. One of the main things these children have in common is that they often lack the ability to articulate themselves verbally, although it is not unheard of to have a four year old or one with advanced verbal skills to dip their toe into the biting pool.

Hitting, unlike biting, is often seen in children both young and old. Despite the fact older children know hitting is not acceptable, their desire to lash out can often overrule their sensibilities. While young children may hit for the same reasons that they may bite (i.e. inability to articulate their thoughts, feelings and needs) older children hit out due to frustration and, frequently, in the hope that their physical reactions can get them what they want. It is not unusual for children of all ages to try to test the limits and breach psychical contact rules.

Common strategies to stop biting

Children who bite display the inability to regulate their emotions and adopt alternative strategies to vent their frustrations in challenging moments. In order to develop the self-control needed to stop biting, children have to be taught how to strengthen their ability to refrain from reacting instantaneously. Doing so means strengthening the child's ability to override their impulses, something which takes time and practice.

Commonplace strategies to stop children biting can feel a little tiresome, not because they do not work but rather because they require a lot of time and effort helicoptering around the child who is prone to having a nibble on another's flesh. Nevertheless, close supervision and an awareness of when children are more likely to bite can help prevent instances from occurring.

Adult reactions to children biting are something that can either discourage or encourage further episodes. If adults laugh off or make a joke out of a biting incident, the child's behaviour can be reinforced in unwanted ways. Setting clear expectations around what is expected, for example, saying, "No biting", in a firm voice before removing a child from the immediate surroundings can let

them know that their behaviour will not be tolerated. In these instances the focus should be about reinforcing the idea that biting is not permissible as opposed to shaming the child.

Building the biter's empathy for the injured party is another strategy that can be actioned. Asking them to get some ice or hold it on the injury they inflicted can help them develop an understanding of ways they can rectify the situation.

When adults identify the potential potency of a situation and predict a possible biting episode, verbally remind children using short, firm words, for example, "No biting". To teach children more acceptable ways to vent their frustrations they can be offered an alternative to help them expel any pent up emotions, for example, biting into a teething ring, hitting a pillow, or throwing a beanbag etc.

Common strategies to stop hitting

Like biting, hitting can be curbed when it is anticipated. Knowing the situations likely to cause a child to lash out will help prevent some hitting situations. Giving clear, verbal instructions that lay the foundations of your expectations are also beneficial.

When children appear ready to strike putting a hand out in front of your body and reiterating the expectation can encourage children to reconsider their intended actions, for example, if a child has their hand poised to hit, placing your own hand in front of you and saying, "You want to hit, but hitting is not okay", can be enough to encourage the child to reconsider their intended actions.

Consequences for hitting can help children to understand that their choices need to be reconsidered in the future. Consistency when enforcing consequences needs to be in place. If children discover that there are not always consequences, they will be less likely to worry about the outcomes of their actions.

Because it can be hard to refrain from reacting negatively in instances where children hit, turning away from the child and ceasing all conversation can be a valuable strategy. Not talking to a child until they have calmed down and stopped hitting can help reset their behavioral choices. When the child has calmed down, conversations about what went wrong and the consequences that will ensue can be had.

When children hit they are trying to express themselves and let their feelings be known. More often than not children will become defensive and even justify their position and actions. It can be tempting to join in the argument and attempt to justify the adult's position and/or recite the rules, however, any such attempt is likely to stoke the child's determination and increase the amount of times they hit.

Rewording known trigger sentences can be another strategy that can be useful. Often adults know the types of things they can and cannot say to children that will trigger a physical outburst. Carefully wording sentences will still let the child know what they can or cannot have but in a way that lessens children's reactions, for example, if they ask for an ice-cream, rather than saying no, say something along the lines of, "What did we agree on before we came to the shops?"

While all of the strategies mentioned above can provide benefits and help to reverse unwanted behaviour, more can be achieved when adults work with children to build their capacity to

emotionally regulate. As such, the final section of this article will focus on how to develop a child's ability to regulate and refrain from lashing out in physical ways.

Building a child's ability to emotionally regulate

Emotional regulation can only occur when an individual has the ability to override the emotional impulses they get when they are experiencing strong feelings. Simply telling a child to stop is not necessarily achievable, meaning children need opportunities to practise. Practising how to fight impulses cannot and should not be attempted when emotions are already running high. In instances where emotions are escalated, adults will need to default to strategies such as the ones mentioned above.

The best opportunities to practise and build emotional regulation will occur when children are calm and not displaying unwanted behaviours. Playing games or setting up activities that are likely to test a child's patience levels in small ways create opportunities for adults to praise children for their efforts, acknowledge children's successes and pause activities until a child returns to state of complete calmness if and when their emotions spike.

In situations where children struggle to regulate their emotions, allow them as much time as they need to gain control of their feelings again, even if it means pressing pause on an activity for as long as necessary. Successfully teaching a child how to emotionally regulate will be determined by the adult's ability to refrain from letting the child return or restart the activity if they are not 100 percent calm and in control of their emotions.

Look for the times where children succeed and do not bite or hit. Instances where children are mildly annoyed by something create perfect opportunities to highlight how they successfully managed feelings of frustration without biting or hitting. Making a big deal of these moments can help trigger more preferred behaviours.

Often children's inability to emotionally regulate is linked to impulse control. Children who do not like to wait for things or demand to be listened to as soon as they start talking fail to recognize the need to practise the art of waiting. Making children wait before they say something or get something can help to increase their ability to fend off impulse urges, thus helping them to master their ability to regulate their emotions.

In summary

Children, particularly younger children, bite as a result of their inability to verbalise their needs and find alternative ways to get what they want. Children of all ages, including older children, hit as a way of venting their frustrations. Like biters, hitters have difficulty regulating their emotional reactions. Eliminating these types of unwanted behaviours takes time, patience and adults who are willing to support and teach children alternative ways to overcome moments that emotionally challenge them.

There are many commonplace strategies adults can use to help children stop biting and hitting. These include being aware of trigger situations, thus helping to prevent them from occurring in the first place. Ensuring that physical behaviour is treated seriously and not laughed off, helping to build children's empathy for the injured party, verbal reminders, acknowledging the child's feelings while reiterating the rule/expectation, removing yourself from the situation, and refraining from entering

into an argument are other strategies that can yield results. To bolster success adults can also endeavour to build children's emotional capacity by highlighting the successes they have when they do not bite or hit. Setting up opportunities (including having children wait to talk or get something) help children to regulate and act less impulsively. Finally, allowing children time to regain control of their emotions before talking to them about what may have gone awry will help children to practise calming themselves, something which is needed if children are to successfully regulate their emotions.

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