



SUE COWLEY IS AN AUTHOR, TRAINER AND HELPS TO RUN HER LOCAL PRESCHOOL.

Little biters

When children start using their teeth to express their fears or frustrations, you must take preventative measures, says Sue Cowley...

EVERY SMALL CHILD EXPERIMENTS with biting – babies will bite on teething rings, dummies and even nip on their parents' fingers, shoulders (or worse!). It is also common for small children to lash out physically, in reaction to stressful situations. Sometimes the two come together, and a small child will bite another child, or an adult. This may happen because they do not have the language to express their fears and frustrations, or because they lack the self-control and self-awareness needed to manage their anger. When small children bite on impulse, they do so because they cannot think of any other way to express their frustrations. However, it is of course a shock for any parent to be told that someone has bitten their child, or indeed that their child has bitten someone else's.

THE SCENARIO

You were shocked when you saw Robert and Oscar fighting, because they are normally good friends. Before you were able to intervene, Oscar bit Robert hard on the upper arm, leaving a nasty red mark. Oscar couldn't explain why he had bitten Robert. When you told Robert's and Oscar's parents about what had happened, they both took the news well. However, a few days later Oscar bit Robert again. This time Robert's parents insisted that you 'do something about it'. You are at a loss about what to do.

THE ISSUE

Stories of small children who bite are surprisingly common, especially those concerning children just starting at an early years setting. This might be caused by the stress of being left in a new environment, surrounded by unknown children and adults. When a child does not yet feel a secure attachment to the adults in the setting, a physical reaction is more likely. Sometimes, biting is a way for children

to express fear, and to get themselves out of a confusing or confrontational situation with another child. Those children who do not yet have the words to say what they feel may use physical means to try to express their needs.

DEALING WITH THE BEHAVIOUR

In the immediate aftermath of any biting incident:

- 1 Stay calm and make sure that both children are away from each other, so that no more harm can be done.
- 2 Deal with the victim of the bite first, helping the child to calm down if he or she is upset. Clean the bite and apply first aid as required.
- 3 Ask both children to describe the incident. It is probably best to do this separately to give them the space to express themselves.
- 4 Talk to the biting child about alternative, more appropriate, ways to deal with his/her frustrations.
- 5 Complete an incident form, and talk to both sets of parents/carers when they come to pick up their children.
- 6 Explain your setting policy on biting incidents, and the steps you plan to take next.

FINDING SOLUTIONS

You need to work with Oscar and his parents to try to resolve the cause of the biting, and to figure out how to move forward together. Remember that this situation is probably just as upsetting for Oscar's parents as it is for Robert's. Be sure that all staff know how to handle physical incidents: include advice within your behaviour management policy.

- * Reassure Robert's parents that you are handling the problem.

Sometimes parents will ask that you exclude a child who bites; if this happens, explain that excluding Oscar is not an option.

- * Ask Oscar's parents to come in for a meeting, so that you can talk together about strategies to use if Oscar bites again. Check with them whether Oscar might be teething – could his behaviour indicate that he is in discomfort?

- * Explain to Oscar that teeth are for chewing and eating, not for biting. Give him 'three special steps' to help him manage his anger, for instance: walk away, count to five, breathe deeply.

- * It's important that all practitioners in your setting react consistently if the biting happens again. Talk through your setting policy with all staff. Ensure that Oscar's key worker is completely clear about the steps to take.

- * Ask Oscar's key worker to supervise him closely over the following days, and to ensure that he is not left alone with Robert.

