

Growing Minds

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Helpful Hints

BOTHERSOME BEHAVIOUR

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During my ten years of working in the child and development field, the one area that most parents seem to ask for the most help regards bothersome behaviour such as biting, hitting, scratching, etc. It is inevitable. At some point in your little child's life, he or she will either be the victim of such behaviour or be the one who is the initiator. It is a horrible feeling to pick up your child after a long day of work to find an incident report waiting for you. It is equally as gut wrenching for the parent of the inflictor to find out that your perfect little tot has hurt one of his classroom friends. Parents are often left asking themselves why their child is displaying such behaviour that is not only troubling, but also embarrassing.

Biting, hitting, and scratching are the three main occurrences that children commonly express around the age of two. At this age, children still are not able to express themselves effectively; their use of verbal language is still not fully developed. Due to this fact, children that find themselves in stressful situations resort to alternative forms of communication; non-verbal, which are usually shown through a bite, scratch, hit, kick or any other pathway, which the child finds effective. Most parents think that their child resorts to this form of behaviour because they want something. This of course can be part of the reason, but not the whole entirety. When a child finds himself or herself in a situation that they don't know how to handle, they often get stressed and experience a lot of tension. We see this especially in newborns. When they are hungry or wet, they cry. Mom or dad responds to them and they settle down. As they grow, babies begin to cry less because they soon realise that they do not have to cry all the time for their needs to be met. They trust that mom or dad will handle the situation and they begin to feel safer and secure in their environments. The same is true with toddlers, but they must re-establish this trust now that they find themselves in more situations that are social where they are key participants.

The most important thing that we can do for children when they display inappropriate behaviour at this age is to not make such a big deal out of it. I realise that this may be a hard concept to understand for some, but the alternative usually only makes things worse. The key is to show your child that no matter what situation he or she finds himself or herself in, that it will be okay in the end. Help is on the way. We want to

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ease the tension of the child, not escalate it. If someone runs over to a child who has just bitten and yells, “No! Biting is bad! We must not bite!” This only elevates the child’s stress. Most children cannot match negative words to actions. If you tell a child he did something bad, he will think *HE* is bad, not the *BEHAVIOUR*. This is what we do not want to happen. To ensure that young children establish a healthy sense of self and self-esteem, we want to use techniques that will enable children to regulate their emotions and to express themselves in a positive manner. To do this, we need to provide an environment where the child trusts that adults will help them sort out their emotions and lead them into the right direction. Consider the following vignette that shows a healthy way to intervene when a child presents bothersome behaviour.

Setting:

Little Ricky is quietly digging in the sandpit. Lucy spots the bright red shovel he is using and decides that she would like to use it. After one failed attempt to retrieve the shovel, she bites Ricky on the shoulder. Ricky screams and Lucy begins to cry. The teacher walks quickly but calmly to tend to the problem and puts Ricky on her lap to comfort him.

Teacher: Lucy, you must feel sad that you hurt Ricky. I know you were upset. You wanted his shovel; but he was playing with it. We can get you another shovel. Ricky is your friend. It hurts our friends when we bite. Now we need to make him better. (Teacher gets an ice pack.) Lucy, can you please help me put this ice pack on Ricky’s bite so you can help make him feel better?

The teacher in the above vignette handled the situation not only calmly, but also in a manner that demonstrated to both children problem solving. She comforted the victim while at the same time making sure the inflictor was involved in the process. The most important thing to note is that the teacher did not put emphasis on what the child did wrong, but instead empathised with the child. She let Lucy know that she understands how she feels and stated what she could have done to solve the problem. Secondly, she briefly stated how Ricky feels and told the child what she could do to help make her friend feel better. Because the teacher handled the situation in such a positive way, Lucy will walk away from the experience with a few lessons and with less tension.

Bothersome behaviour, of course, will not change over night. It can take months of reinforcing positive behaviour before a change is seen. These behaviours occur at this developmental stage in a child’s life and there is little we can do to put a halt to it. What we can do is try our best to make sure that when the child reaches the end of this stage, they will step out of it emotionally secure. This is why we must practice intervention techniques that promote a healthy sense of well-being. It is vital that these techniques are consistent both at home and at school.

In conclusion, it is important to remain patient with children while they are sorting through their emotions. It is an important journey in development that is not easy for parents or their children. We need to understand this challenging phase in children’s lives and offer support not only to the children, but also to their parents. It is also important that we remain confidential when behavioural incidents occur. The worst

thing to happen is for parents to have confrontations that are often unproductive and upsetting. Please know and trust that your child's teacher has been trained to handle these occurrences and that if you haven't received the support that you need, talk to the centre director or seek further guidance from a professional.



Things you can do to help:

- Make sure you or someone else in your home is not modelling behaviour you are trying to eliminate. Avoid mixed messages.
- Please ensure that your child's nails are cut short. Long or jagged nails cannot only unintentionally hurt others but also your child.
- If your child attends a child care and you do witness or over hear information regarding another child, please keep it to yourself. It is understandable to be upset. Confidentiality is very important when working in a day care setting.
- Talk to a professional regarding any concerns that you may have. There is always someone who can work through these issues with you.
- Remember...It is just a phase! Most children grow out of it. In the unlikely event that a child continues to show aggressive behaviour by the age of four, additional guidance may be needed.