

Hannibal Lecter or My Sweet Little Bundle of Joy

At age 2 my child became the class biter. Around that time, he ran over a little girl's fingers with his toy fire truck and refused to apologize. I panicked, jumped on Amazon and bought a book on moral development. I always thought that I would have to deal with a victim, not the bully. Now, I feared that my "bundle of joy" was turning into the iconic, sociopathic cannibal of 90's film. What should I do?

The problem is that the answer is not so simple. Somewhere between 7 months and 2 years, that sweet little bundle realizes that a world exists outside itself. In other words, feelings of hunger do not spontaneously lead to food; wetness is not just automatically relieved, and feelings of anger or uneasiness are not just automatically assuaged. Rather, there is a big world of others out there. Subsequently, this being must separate—define him/herself, apart from the others; "No" is the ultimate declaration of this need.

We want nothing else for our child. Without separation or "individuation," they will not develop into the loving human we hope to raise. Without a sense of self and a sense that they exist apart from others, they cannot love - they can only have self love.

Biting must be understood in this context. New science shows that infants show signs of empathy. In other words, their feelings often reflect and respond sympathetically to the feelings or plight of others. However, throughout infancy, their need to separate, and follow their own impulses, overpowers these feelings.

If I want something, why not use all resources at my disposal. Biting is a great resource. My parents are always encouraging me to use my mouth. If it gets me something that I like, I should keep doing it.

This makes perfect sense. However, if the biting immediately leads to losing desired objects or attention, the child will learn that this is not an effective tool. Perhaps, words work better.

If you ask me if I meant to bite, I will say – yes! Am I sorry? No. I meant to do it. I had the urge or thought it might get me that toy!

This is not budding sociopathy. Rather it is the thinking of a necessary powerful ego drive. Empathy exists, but the power of the ego drive quickly distracts. We need not worry that our child will be the star of a psychological thriller one day. He may like Chianti and liver, but not one extracted from his classmate.

So what can we expect?

--Your child will probably go through a biting phase at some point before age 3. This is developmentally normal.

- Biting is more significant when aggressive behavior is modeled at home (TV or actual aggression between family members)
- Biting occurs predictably around tooth eruption (when the mouth is a point of focus), around 8-12 months as a expression of excitement, and during the 2nd year of life when skills are developing unevenly (language lags other abilities)
- Biting can be used to obtain something from another child, get attention, or as an expression of emotional overflow.
- Even if a child knows that biting is wrong, he unlikely will be able to hold this knowledge in his mind long enough or saliently enough to overcome his impulse when excited.

What can we do?

- Consider whether the child is in a setting that is too demanding for their developmental level. This can lead to a particularly high level of frustration.
- At all cost, avoid modeling aggressive behavior. “Biting back” tells the child that this behavior is acceptable.
- Respond to the event with an abrupt reprimand (“No” or “No Biting”) and isolate and ignore the perpetrator.
- Pay close attention to secondary gain—this is usually misdirected attention. Lengthy explanations are too often lost on the child and perceived, instead, as attention for the action. Negative attention is still attention for a child who wants attention.
- Consider giving attention to the victim—this reinforces prevention of secondary gain and models empathetic behavior.
- After reprimanding and isolating the child for a period of time, consider helping the child process his feelings.
- DO NOT PANIC-- even if the skin is broken, this is NOT a medical emergency. Most bites do not get infected, and in our community, infections from bites virtually always respond to common antibiotics.

Finally, consider a glass of Chianti (for the parents, of course)!

Eric Berger, MD
July 2011