

Biting Behavior in Toddlers and How to Respond

Becky Sugrim: Hi, and welcome to Parallel Play, a podcast for educators who love toddlers, where we specifically focus on toddlers and how best to support their development. My name is Becky Sugrim. My pronouns are she/her.

Mike Brown: I'm Mike Brown. My pronouns are he/him. We're from the National Center on Early Childhood Development, Teaching and Learning, or NCECDTL.

Becky: Mike, I'm so excited to talk with you today. I'm always excited to talk with you at any time, but we're specifically going to be talking about biting behavior in toddlerhood, and this topic always came up. I talked about it a lot with families as an educator in a group care setting, and it was always requested as professional development in my role as a coach.

Mike: Yes, I'm so excited to be here, as always. It's always good to be in community with you all. I'm looking forward to it, and I've worked in so many different roles and where this came up as well, whether it's group care setting, as a support staff, a substitute, a coach, in leadership, and now as an indirect role as a consultant.

I take a whole systems approach when it comes to this work and really supporting toddlers, an age group that's often overlooked. I think this is our first time we're ever having a guest speaker, I'm excited to be able to introduce our special guest for this episode, Beth Morehouse.

Beth Morehouse: Hi, everyone. I'm Beth Morehouse, and my pronouns are she/her. I'm also from the National Center on Early Childhood Development, Teaching and Learning. I've worked in early childhood as a teacher, a coach, a trainer, and throughout my career in early childhood education, biting has come up. My passion is social-emotional learning and development, and that's why I'm so glad the Parallel Play team has asked me to be a guest today and talk about biting in toddlers. This behavior involves both development and social-emotional learning.

Becky: We're so excited to have you with us today, Beth. We have lots and lots to talk about.

Mike: Let's start with all the emotions that comes up around biting. Emotions from the child who bites, the child who's bitten, the families of both children, and the educator in the space, because we all have feelings about biting.

Becky: And, you know, Mike, I often wonder if everyone you listed, you know, everyone involved might be feeling the exact same feelings. Maybe everyone is feeling nervous or worried or overwhelmed, scared, or maybe unsure.

Beth: The child who bit might feel unsure how to communicate their wants and needs, and the child who was bitten might feel unsure about what just happened, why.

Becky: The families might feel unsure of why their child is biting or has been bitten, and really kind of unsure about what to do next and how to support their child.

Mike: And the educators might be feeling the exact same way. Biting brings up so many emotions, and it can be so complex with all these layered of emotions of everyone involved.

Beth: Our experience, culture, and bias all affect how we view biting behavior in toddlers. It influences the emotions that biting brings up for us and how we respond to it.

Mike: Biting can bring up so many different feelings, feelings in adults, and provoke a variety of different responses from us. One of them actually being suspending the toddler, or removing the child from the program setting, or removing the child from the activity for an extended period of time. All of that does not really support the child in learning new or different behaviors to use instead of biting.

Becky: Thanks so much for bringing that up, Mike. And just a quick refresh of some of the terms you mentioned were, you know, suspension is a temporary removal of a child from a learning setting, and expulsion is the permanent removal of a child from the setting. A soft suspension or a soft expulsion might be something like telling the family that their child is not yet ready for group care setting or sending a child home early due to an incident related to behavior like biting. It also includes standing by as a family withdraws their child from the program due to a specific situation. And each one of these scenarios is classified as suspension or expulsion.

Beth: Research tells us and shows that Black boys and boys of color are suspended and expelled at higher rates than other children. We must be extremely intentional in reflecting on our feelings and biases because biting is a behavior that is normal and developmentally appropriate for toddlers, and Black boys are disciplined more for it.

Mike: To learn more about this research and how to actively disrupt it, check out the Supporting the School Readiness and Success for Young African American Boys Strategy Guide on the ECLKC website. Because for Black boys and for all children who bite, we really need to be reflective and intentional practitioners. We need to ask ourselves questions like, am I responding to every child in a way that is supportive and meets the individual needs of this specific child?

Beth: It's all about the relationships in our work with toddlers. Like all behaviors, biting communicates a message in the same way a toddler does reaching, running, laughing, or hugging communicates a message. There's something about biting that can provoke strong feelings within adults in the learning environment.

Mike: How exactly do we respond? What should we do when biting is happening in the learning environment?

Beth: Well, there's all sorts of things to do, Mike, but when biting is occurring, we want to think about four steps. First, find the why of the behavior, then prevent the behavior, next respond

to the behavior, and then teach a new skill. These steps can be used to support an adult in addressing any behavior, not just biting. They can also be used when supporting children of all ages, not just toddlers.

Mike: Thanks, Beth, for introducing these four steps. It sounds like, you know, working through these steps can be particularly helpful when we work with toddlers because they are so passionate about life. They're passionate about wanting to learn. They feel their emotions intensely and often are non-verbal. These are some of the many reasons why we love toddlers. These are also some of the reasons why it can be really hard for those of us who work and care for toddlers.

Beth: I also want to mention that these steps do not have to be done alone. Working through the steps with families, coaches, mental health consultants, and other service providers is beneficial for everyone.

Mike: I did not move much today. Let's get our steps in today. Let's start with the first step, finding the why.

Beth: What we want to do in this step is to think about why the child or children are biting. This will help us figure out what purpose biting is serving for the child and how biting is getting the child's needs met.

Becky: In this step, we're thinking about, you know, we're thinking beyond the form of the behavior, which is biting, and instead we're looking at the function of the behavior.

Beth: Yeah, exactly. The form is what the behavior is. It's what the child is doing. The function is the purpose behind the behavior or the reason why the behavior is occurring.

Mike: So we need to address the function of the behavior to support the child in learning a different, more pro-social behavior that meet the same need and serve the same purpose as the biting does.

Beth: Addressing the function of the biting and finding out the why behind it is a critical step to preventing and stopping the behavior.

Becky: Beth, we've talked a little bit about form and function. Can you give us some examples of functions of behaviors?

Beth: Sure. Often the function of a behavior, like biting, is that the child wants something or doesn't want something.

Mike: I got a couple ideas here. You mean like when the toddler might bite because they want something to chew on to, like, relieve their teething pain or like when they want a specific toy to play with or when they want to play with another child and they kind of don't have the tools to ask yet?

Becky: Kind of thinking the reverse. A child might bite because they don't want something. Like, they don't want to stop the activity they're doing, or they don't want to transition to a new activity or maybe they want a break from the loud or crowded environment, or they don't want another child to be, you know, that close to them.

Mike: Basically, biting is a form of communication. Toddlers might engage in biting as a way of communicating because they don't have the language or know other skills to communicate what they want or what they need verbally or non-verbally.

Beth: Yes, those are all examples of why a toddler might be engaging in biting. When we start brainstorming about the why behind the behavior, it's important to connect with family. We can find out more information about the behavior, what the family's perspective is of the behavior, and if or when it's happening at home.

Mike: All this information is really helpful in really making a hypothesis of the function of the behavior. It sounds like observation is a vital piece. It's an important piece in finding the why behind the behavior.

Beth: It is a key piece. Finding the why is all about observing the child, gathering information about the child, and about what is happening before and after the behavior to figure out the purpose or function of the behavior.

Becky: Sometimes, the function of the behavior isn't always clear. If the biting behavior is frequent and finding the why isn't clear, commit to observing the behavior over multiple instances and occurrences. While taking notes, you still want to respond and prevent the behavior whenever possible.

We want to make notes of the details of the situation so that we can start to look for a pattern throughout the occurrences of biting. We need to observe enough times so that we can start to see a pattern emerge. If a pattern isn't emerging within your data, try observing and making notes a few more times. Again, connect with the family and think through notes with other colleagues.

Beth: When collecting this information, remember to look for what is happening right before the behavior and what is happening right after. Those are key pieces to figuring out the function of the behavior and help educators figure out what social-emotional skills to teach the child and how we can prevent the behavior from happening in the future.

Mike: It's like we're Scooby-Doo. We're looking for clues. We have to look at what comes before the biting because that's going to give us clues into what is setting this child up, right? What's provoking them or what's prompting the child to bite? And then by looking at what happens after the biting occurs, it's really letting us know what the child is getting or they're not getting from biting.

Becky: I think it would be helpful to think through an example of finding the why. Let's set up a scenario. In a group care setting with two educators and eight toddlers, free play has just started and Sophia has bitten a couple of the children in different areas of the room.

Beth: My first thought is to remember it's important to think about what happened before, during, and after the biting occurred. It sounds like we might need a little bit more information, Becky, about what happened right before and right after Sophia bit.

Becky: The first time Sophia bit was a few minutes after free play started. There was a lot of noise in the environment as the children were engaged in different activities and Sophia was at the water table with three other children. She turned to the child next to her and bit them. The child cried and then they left the water table.

Mike: Then the next time Sophia bit was after she had been playing at the water table and moved to the dramatic play area. Dramatic play area is kind of that smaller area where there might be a lot of furniture for the children to use, such as a table, chairs, a kitchen, and a baby bed. There were also two other children in that area. One of the children moved closer to Sophia, who was by the kitchen sink. Sophia reacted by biting the child and the child left the dramatic play area.

Beth: In both instances, Sophia was in the areas of the environment with multiple children. After she bit the other child, they left the area. I wonder if the function of Sophia's biting is to avoid physical closeness or to get more space in a play area that she would like to be in. This is my hypothesis based on the information we have.

Mike: What's next? At this point, you would probably want to connect with Sophia's family and partner with them around the possible function of Sophia's biting. We would also want to observe times when she's not biting. For example, are there other children around or is Sophia just playing alone?

Becky: Now that we've figured out the why behind the biting, which could be to get something or get away from something or as a means of communication, what are we going to do next? What do we do next?

Beth: We want to start thinking about a way to prevent the behavior. How can we set up the environment and what supports can we provide the child, so they don't have to bite to get their needs met?

Mike: It's about providing individualized prevention strategies by really looking at what is happening right before the biting and thinking about the why behind the biting so we can really intentionally choose strategies that will support this specific child. Individualization is about really matching the strategies to a child's learning characteristics, their development, their interests, and of course, their needs.

Becky: I think this is such a great time to check in about our relationships with the specific child. You said it earlier, Beth, our work with toddlers is all about relationships we have with them and with their families. When a child is engaging in biting, we really want to be mindful of our interactions with the child so that we can make sure we are engaging with them in positive, healthy, respectful, and responsive ways. You know, we might ask ourselves, am I providing nurturing responsive care to this child?

Mike: We also really want to think about how are we setting up a supporting environment for the child, which really ties into the individualized prevention strategies we'll provide in a bit. If you want to learn more about nurturing relationships and supporting environments, we encourage you to go back and check out the 2022- 2023 season of Teacher Time on positive behavior supports.

Beth: We can collect data through observation and look back at our notes and find ways to adjust the environment to be more supportive of the child. When thinking about prevention strategies, it can be helpful to look at what is happening right before that behavior and put supports in place that address those warnings that biting might get be getting ready to happen.

Becky: If you know a child is biting because they want something, then prevention strategies might include having multiples of an item or using a simple visual or visuals that the child can use to ask for a turn or ask for help or ask for a snack or a teether if they're seeking that sensory input.

Mike: Something I like to use if a child is biting because they want to avoid something like stopping the task that they're doing, I like to use a timer or give them a heads up in a few minutes that a transition is going to be happening and that has been super helpful in my experience.

Mike: Also, using a visual schedule of the day so the child can see what's coming up, using language like first this then that, can really support a child in knowing, hey, something's about to happen and a task is coming up next. For example, first we wash our hands, then hopefully they can repeat it for me, but if not, I say then we sit down for a snack.

Beth: Transitions can be challenging. In addition to the prevention strategy you mentioned, Mike, we can provide the child with a choice before transition happens. Offering a child, a real choice where either option they pick is doable can empower and motivate the child during that transition.

Becky: Like you could provide a choice where, again like you just said Beth, where both options the toddler chooses are acceptable and how the child can get to the next activity. So maybe it's like, would you like to hop like a bunny or crawl like a bear? Or maybe you offer a choice of where they would like to sit at the lunch table and any seat, they pick is acceptable.

Becky: Or you offer them a choice of what song they would like to sing while they wash their hands, and you just want to make sure it's a song that you know, and you can support them in singing it.

Beth: There are so many prevention strategies. It's about providing individualized strategies that address the event or events in the environment that predict or provoke biting. We are looking for those warning signs that biting might happen and how we can address those by meeting the child's needs at that moment instead of the child relying on biting.

Mike: We packed a lot in these last 20-25 minutes. We talked about finding the why behind the biting and prevention strategies we can put in place. But I'm dying to know, what do we do when the biting does occur? Like how do we respond to it?

Beth: First, we want to make sure those prevention strategies are in place and consistent. Then intentionally plan how you're going to respond to biting. Plan so much and talk through your plans so often that it becomes your natural response to biting. This way you can respond to the behavior in a regulated way versus reacting through your emotions.

Becky: I'm all about planning so I love that we have to talk through our plan a lot. And you know, Beth, my other question is what types of things should we plan for? So, what things should be included in our response?

Beth: Safety is our number one priority. We want to check on both children involved and follow the state and program guidelines and regulations around to how we tend to the bite.

Mike: You know, one of my favorite things about working with toddlers is that they're just emerging empathizers. They're really just starting to understand for the first time in life that, hey, other people have different feelings and different perspectives. While we're tending to the bite, we can really support the child who bit in further developing empathy and then making the connection that biting really does kind of hurt.

Beth: That's so right, Mike. You might say something like, "Tay is crying because biting hurts." Or you might model empathy by saying, "I'm checking on Tay to see if they're okay as you're tending to the child who has been bitten."

Becky: After you've tended to the bite, we want to acknowledge both children's feelings. You might say to the child who bit, "you really wanted to play with the stacking rings. You can say, "my turn instead."

Beth: Or if you're using a visual support, you can show the child a visual for turn-taking in addition to giving them the words to say. Remember, children cannot learn new skills when they are flooded with emotions. Right after the bite might not be the time to teach a new skill. It's time to support the child in co-regulating. It's important to name what you expect children to do and support them in learning the skill when their emotions are regulated.

Mike: Now, if you see a child is actually about to start biting, you can move quickly to them. Understand the power dynamics. And maybe you want to get on their level if you're physically able. And you can say something like, "hey, hold on now, or stop. I'm not going to let you bite and hurt your friend." Or hey, "stop. No bite."

Maybe you have a teether or a teething cloth ready to offer the child. Or you have those visuals that we talked about that show some of the things that you think the child might personally need. Like, hey, a snack or reading a book with an adult, the cozy area. Or once again, going back to helping them use their words and asking for them to take a turn.

Beth: That's right, Mike. Or you might ask the child to point to the visual of what they are wanting in that moment. Or you might take your best guess based on your observations and why you think the child is biting and say, "you wanted to stay in the block area longer. It's time to clean up." You could also say, "I don't like that and take a deep breath like you're smelling a flower." You may always have a fake flower with you to support the child in using this skill.

Mike: You know, as educators, we might think we have to teach, teach, teach, teach. And sometimes the child might not be ready to learn. Something you mentioned earlier, Beth, that's really sticking with me, is when you said we can't teach a child a new skill when they are dysregulated. For me, it's hitting home that it's really important that we take time to help both children involved co-regulate by being responsive to their needs.

Becky: Going back to the beginning of our conversation, all the way at the beginning of the podcast, we talked about how biting can bring up a lot of emotions for everyone. And it's really important that we check in with ourselves to see if we need support in co-regulating our own emotions.

Beth: That is so true, Becky. And educators are not alone. There's many people who you can reach out to, connect and engage with for support when biting is a concern. From coaches to family, to family support staff and supervisors, health service coordinators, program administrators, support staff, mental health specialists, and education managers are all people you can connect and engage with during the whole process of finding the why, preventing and responding to the behavior, and helping you regulate along the way.

Mike: I feel like a broken record now, but I'm going to repeat something you've said now, Becky. We are working as a team, and a team and collaboration is key. If you are working in a learning environment with multiple adults, lean into one another. Use them. Everyone can support each other in intentionally responding, and intentionally planning, and intentionally preventing biting, while also supporting each other with co-regulation when necessary.

Beth: It's critical that adults support each other, especially with the rise of child incidents. Our wellness and emotional regulation are essential to providing responsive care to all children, and it takes a supportive community to do so.

Becky: I also want to say how important it is to include families as a part of this team. Beth, I'm curious to know what is your top tip for how to communicate and collaborate with families when biting is a concern?

Beth: Becky, just one tip is really hard. Letting families know biting for toddlers is developmentally appropriate behavior, and usually used by toddlers to communicate their needs is so important. When collaborating with families, ask if they see biting behavior at home. If so, what do they notice? When does it happen? Who's involved?

How do they respond? Families can share ideas and help identify what the child is trying to communicate. It's also important to communicate with the family of the child who was bitten, letting the family know that they are responding to the behavior and teaching skills to prevent the biting from happening again. And again, reinforcing this behavior is not unusual for toddlers who are learning to communicate.

Mike: We have talked through the why behind the behavior, using prevention strategies, and planning on how we will respond. What's next?

Beth: We're going to teach a new skill. This is where we look back at our observation data and think about the why behind the biting and the function of the behavior. We want to teach a child a new, more pro-social skill which will meet their needs as effectively as biting does.

Becky: Some of these things might include using simple signs and teaching simple signs like, stop, please, and mine are very helpful. Or like we talked about just recently, using simple visual cues that are accessible to the child that depicts images like my turn or ask for help.

Mike: You can also make the child their own ring of one or two visual cues that they can hold on to and use throughout the day. Need some inspiration on it? Check out the classroom visuals and supports page on the ECLK site website for free printable PDFs of the visual.

Beth: An important piece of teaching a new skill is that we teach the skill when the child is calm and not only when the biting is occurring. We support the child throughout the day and in all activities to practice using the new skill. Whether it's using signs, visual supports, or providing the child with the words to say in the moment.

Becky: This might include modeling a gentle touch on a toddler's hand or practicing taking turns at group time by passing a musical instrument around. And when we're modeling a new skill, we want to talk about it. Name what you're doing and why you're doing it. Support the toddler in understanding and making those connections between the new skill and how it can help get their needs met.

Mike: Providing the child with positive descriptive feedback when you see them engage in the new skill at any point of the day really reinforces that new skill. And really be specific with what you see and celebrate the toddler. It's reminding me of something we talked about earlier,

Becky, in a different time, place. Can you talk a little bit more about the piggy bank and where to find it?

Becky: I love the relationship piggy bank, and you can find more about the relationship piggy bank on the ECLKC website. If you look into the Building Relationships with Infants and Toddlers Teacher Time episode. Mike, when you're talking about this positive descriptive feedback and adding a deposit into a relationship piggy bank, it might sound something like Kiva, I saw you hold out your hand to Paloma and you said mine. You did it. You asked if you could have a block.

Beth: Providing that positive feedback will also support the relationship you have with the child. We want to make sure we are engaging in warm positive interactions with the child more than we are redirective interactions.

Becky: Yes, totally. This goes back to the importance of providing all toddlers with individualized, nurturing, responsive and respectful care.

Mike: And to bring it all home, this is also a great reminder to know that, hey, you can lean into others once again, and collaborating with others including the families really ensures that everyone has all the tools that they personally need to help the toddler develop the new skills at home, in the community and in the program setting.

Mike: We have talked so much today. I'm so grateful for this conversation. Beth, thank you for helping us think through these four steps to addressing and responding to biting with toddlers.

Beth: Thank you for having me. Remember you can think through finding the why, prevention strategies, responding, and teaching a new skill with any behavior.

Becky: We hope that you will please share what you've learned with us in the Teacher Time community on MyPeers with colleagues, friends, and families of toddlers.

Mike: We look forward to seeing you in that space. Until next time, talk to you later.