

The Biting Solution

Lisa Poelle, M.A.



**The Expert's No-Biting Guide for Parents,
Caregivers, and Early Childhood Educators**

Praise for
***The Biting Solution: The Expert's Guide for Parents,
Caregivers, and Early Childhood Educators***

A great “guide-by-your-side” resource that offers a wealth of information in an easy to read and accessible way. It’s surprising that a book with such a specific focus can have such broad applications; this book could be used for a variety of challenging behaviors, with a variety of populations. Ms. Poelle’s approach and strategies demonstrate not only a solid knowledge of early childhood development, but also a terrific grasp of how adults learn, giving them the tools they need to help children make changes that are effective and genuine.

—SUSAN EINBENDER, parent adviser, Early Intervention at Pennsylvania School
for the Deaf

As managing director of more than 20 preschools and an educator for 17 years, I have never seen such an effective tool for dealing with socially unacceptable behaviors as The Biting Solution. I have personally witnessed complete behavioral transformations in students who were once deemed problematic. An invaluable resource for all parents and teachers.

—JILL HOWARD, executive director, Preschool of America

A must-have book for parents and teachers of young children. . . . The examples of actual situations and customized solutions clearly illustrate how to use this method with children of different ages. A great tool for anyone living or working with young children!

—STEPHANIE DOCKWEILER, M.A., president, QS2 Training and Consulting

As the child care center director of many programs, I have consistently used Lisa Poelle’s advice in tackling a myriad of challenges. I highly recommend her book to both early childhood educators and parents.

—JOAN CAMPANELLA-SHUTT, child care center director

Sound advice about how to eliminate hurtful behavior . . . which is often misunderstood and not always respectfully extinguished. A must-read for childcare providers, parents of young children, and parents of twins.

—DIANNE THOMAS, licensed marriage and family therapist, twins specialist, and
parent educator

Wow! Great book! Parents and teachers get a better understanding of why young children resort to hurting each other, plus effective, concrete ideas to prevent and respond to these problem behaviors.

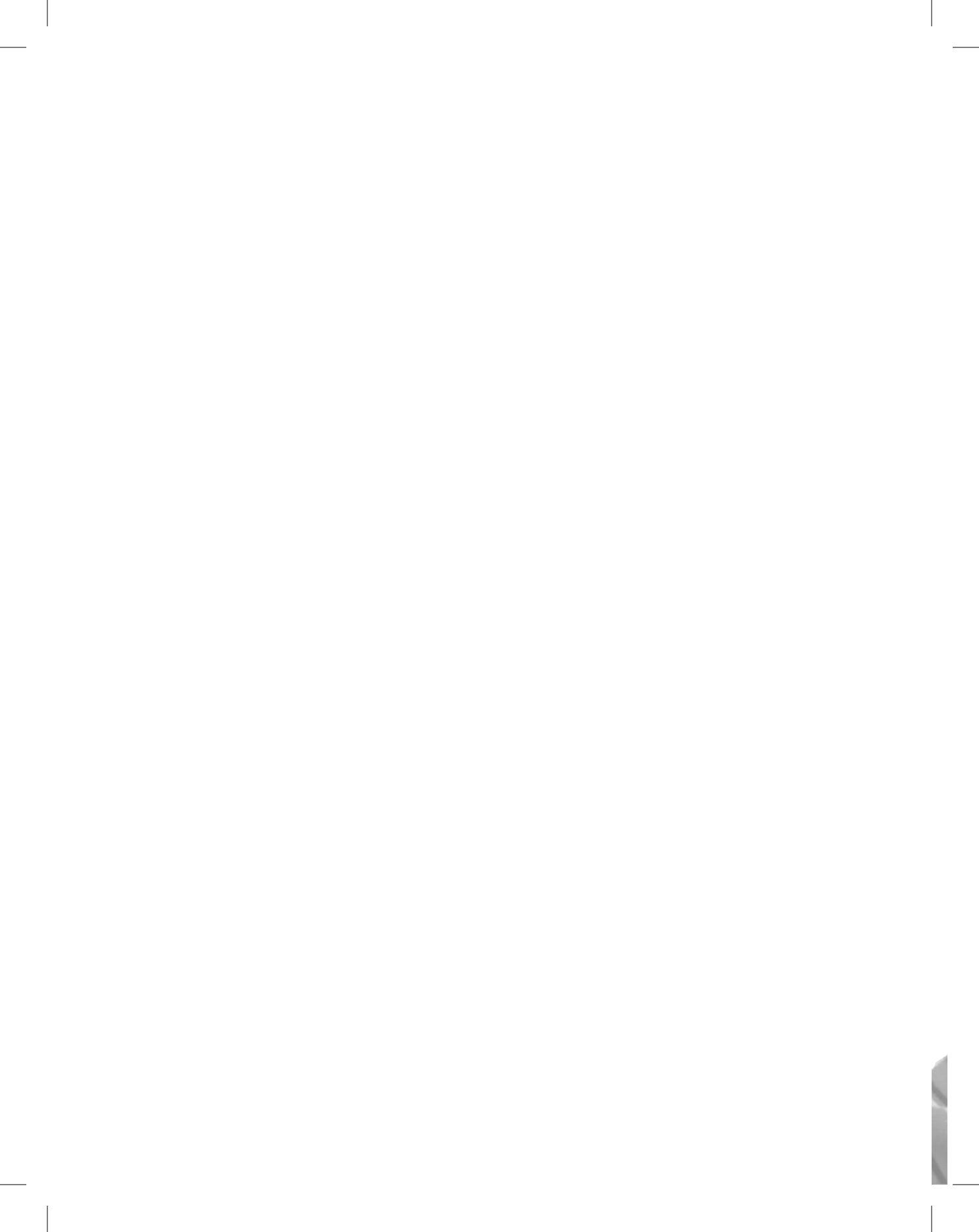
—LAUREN KUEHN, director, Green Hills Pre-School

Lisa Poelle’s firm, warm writing style calms and empowers parents and educational professionals.

—JENNIFER BUTCH, early childhood educator, NYC Early Childhood Professional
Development Institute

[The Biting Solution] provides very effective and wise solutions that work.

—ELLEN GALINSKY, president, Families and Work Institute; author, Mind in the
Making: The Seven Essential Skills Every Child Needs



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The Expert's No-Biting Guide for Parents,
Caregivers, and Early Childhood Educators

Lisa Poelle, M.A.



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Dedication

I dedicate this book to my husband
with whom I fell deeply in love when I was but a teenager.
Thank you, Mark, for your endless support, adventuresome spirit,
and unconditional love.

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Foreword

Early childhood is a time of tremendous growth. It is an exciting period when new skills seem to appear every day. It is also a time, however, when young children's behavior can be difficult for adults to understand—especially when it is persistent and hurtful. The goal of fostering respect for others may seem far away when biting and fighting demand center stage. Parents, teachers, and child care providers need help to understand some of the *challenging* behaviors of early childhood. Lisa Poelle's book, *The Biting Solution*, provides that support and understanding and helps take the mystery out of misbehavior.

Toddlers and young preschoolers, the age group focused on in this book, are learning significant motor, language, and social skills like sharing, helping, and cooperating. They are also learning important emotional skills like empathy and self-reliance. It's little wonder that, for some of them, frustrations can surface quickly and anger may seem out of control. Giving parents and child care providers guides from a developmental perspective can help them understand what may be causing *difficult* behavior. Encouraging them to quickly apply and use what they have learned is a unique feature embedded within the book.

The Biting Solution is written in a conversational and supportive style. A *process* is introduced that encourages adults to communicate regularly, collect child observations, and develop an Action Plan. Adults work together for the benefit of the child. Simplistic explanations like “she's teething” or “he'll grow out of it” are avoided. The book reminds readers that there is never one clear reason for a particular behavior, and seeking an answer by jumping to the wrong conclusion only creates more frustration.

This book reflects Lisa Poelle's years of experience as a guidance consultant to parents and early childhood educators. It reflects her strong commitment to a practical, problem-solving approach to help adults deal with young children's behaviors that are volatile, repetitive, and aggressive. The book is written in a fact-finding versus fault-finding manner, consistently considering solutions that are objective and age appropriate. Biting, especially, can be a behavior that is laden with guilt and shame . . . for *all* involved. *The Biting Solution* provides adults with tools to deal with difficult behavior in a collaborative and pro-active way.

—DIANNE W. EYER, PROFESSOR EMERITA

Early Childhood Education and Child Development

Cañada College, Redwood City, California

Co-author, Infants, Toddlers and Caregivers, 9th edition

Acknowledgments

Many thanks to the people who had a special impact on my professional growth, as well as those who supported me while I wrote this book:

All of the parents, teachers, and caregivers who over the years have shared their stories and struggles with me.

Elizabeth Jones, my Master's degree advisor at Pacific Oaks College: Her insightful stories, thoughtful teaching, and emphasis on authentic personal reflection helped me learn many valuable lessons about myself and my field.

Children's Health Council, Palo Alto, California: I spent ten years at this multidisciplinary agency working as a parent educator, child care consultant, and mentoring program director. The lessons I learned through my experiences working with the caring professionals at this agency shaped my professional growth and formed the bedrock of my understanding of human development. It was a learning environment like no other, and I am eternally grateful for the opportunity.

Dianne Thomas, my colleague and office mate for ten years: I will never forget our many poignant conversations about difficult cases and fascinating people. Thank you for proofreading my manuscript and sharing your insights and perspectives.

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Carolyn Kelso, my mom: Thank you for thoughtfully proofreading my manuscript early in the process and for always supporting me emotionally with your loving embrace, even from afar.

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Barbara Poelle, my daughter-in-law: I appreciate the special expertise you shared with me to help me learn to navigate the world of publishing.

Carolyn Threadgill, my editor: Thank you from the bottom of my heart for your faith and expertise in bringing this project to fruition.

How to Use This Book

As a guidance consultant to parents and early childhood educators, much of my work has focused on helping to solve the mystery of a young child's frequent biting episodes as quickly as possible. In most cases, an ultimatum has been given to parents by the program: get the biting to stop or the child will be expelled from the group. Typically, parents are given two to three weeks to accomplish this daunting task.

The Biting Solution will prepare you to deal expertly with having a biting child in your midst, whether it is in your own family, a play group, a child care center, a part-day preschool, or any other kind of early childhood program. No longer will you be caught off guard by the firestorm of emotions that accompany biting. Based on what I've learned through my experiences with many children who bite, I've developed a process for dealing successfully with this volatile issue. *In fact, it works for all types of hurtful behaviors.*

The children

All the techniques in *The Biting Solution* are equally useful for working or living with typically developing children and those with identified *special needs*. Adults who work with children who have special needs must strive to become especially clear and consistent in their responses to various challenging behaviors.

The communication techniques described in this book will help parents and caregivers hone their skills so that children can learn what is expected of them more readily. *Instructive Intervention* (page 19) is an effective tool for helping adults gain consistency and clarity in their responses to all children.

The *Seven Questions* (page 12) offer a useful perspective on interpreting a wide variety of factors influencing a child's behavior. Where special needs are involved (for example, autism spectrum disorders or Down Syndrome), the questions regarding social/emotional development, verbal skills, physical condition, and the nature of the physical environment will be particularly helpful in figuring out the cause of the biting problem. In addition, every "How to Help the Child" section provides specific, proven ways for adults to help prevent meltdowns.

Children with special needs require an extraordinary amount of patience from the adults in their lives, and those adults require an extraordinary amount of resources and support. *The Biting Solution* offers such assistance to all adults who work or live with young children, those who are typically developing, those with identified special needs, or those for whom you sense something "more" is needed even when you don't know the reason.

The process

The process I use involves child observations, communication among parents, teachers, and caregivers, and design of a customized *Action Plan* with a role for everyone to play.

When interviewing adults about when and how the hurtful behavior occurs, I find that everyone always has a theory about why it is happening. Very few have a concrete plan for making changes. Typically, adults believe the problem lies within the child. Adults

are perennially frustrated when the child won't "mind them" or "play nice" with others. They explain the behavior by saying: "She just doesn't want to listen," or "he's teething," or "her parents keep her up too late at night," or he "lacks verbal skills," etc. Adults usually pin the child's behavior on one "reason" and leave it at that. Rarely do they ever consider the potential benefits of changing their own behavior, the daily schedule, or the child's environment. Often, miscommunication or complete lack of communication between parents and caregivers clouds the issues and creates unnecessary obstacles to behavioral changes.

Think like a consultant

All adults—parents, teachers, and caregivers—will be most effective when they set aside their own personal point of view and, instead, learn how to "think like a consultant." Whenever a child is struggling with biting or other hurtful behavior, adults can learn how to do observations and interviews that will uncover reasons for the behavior. In doing so, they'll take the mystery out of the misbehavior. Whether parent or early childhood professional, adults can learn to recognize and reduce stressors, set reasonable limits, and promote pro-social behavior. As you will discover, most changes need to be made by the adults. Each chapter offers specific ways for them to adjust their own behavior and alter the setting, to create a better fit for the child at home and for the children in group care. I have found that these lessons can be learned and applied fairly quickly, regardless of past experience. Consider me the newest member of your support team as you learn to solve biting problems.

What to do the minute biting happens

Part I deals with hurtful behavior from various adults' points of view. The first chapter focuses on how people feel and behave when there is a child who bites. The second chapter demonstrates Instructive Intervention, a technique to be used *as soon as hurtful behavior occurs* at home or in an early childhood program.

Solving biting issues with the Seven Questions

Part II asks the Seven Questions, the core of the book, whose answers will shed light on reasons behind a child's behavior. Thinking about your own child or a specific child in group care while reading these chapters will help you think concretely. Each chapter will include specific solutions targeted to your needs.

Intervention in action

Part III presents five case studies to illustrate how this process was actually used with young children at various ages. In the first section of each case study I provide background information about the family, early childhood program, and the history of the misbehavior. Next, you will find notes from my observations and interviews based on the Seven Questions. Last, you will read the customized Action Plan that I and the other adults developed and used for each case. I think it will be extremely useful for you to see this tool in action. The three age groups shown in case studies are toddlers (15-24 months), two-year-olds, and three-year-olds.

The Seven Questions

1. How much of the child's behavior is related to typical social/emotional development?
2. What past experiences or recent changes may be creating stress?
3. Is the lack of verbal skills causing frustration?
4. Is the child's physical condition a contributing factor?
5. What role does the child's temperament play in the behavior?
6. What effect does the physical environment of the home or early childhood program have on the child?
7. What kind of limit setting is the child experiencing at home and with other caregivers or teachers?

Creating your "Action Plan"

Part IV provides an opportunity for you to design your own customized Action Plan, a blueprint for the actions adults need to take to reduce a child's stressors and set the stage for success. After three or four days of implementing your plan, you should have started to see a reduction in biting *if the changes are in place and consistently applied*. In a week, you should see dramatic reduction. By two weeks, the child's biting will very likely be a thing of the past. If your child is still frequently hurting others after three weeks, the child may have a more serious underlying problem that needs a thorough evaluation by a developmental or medical expert. In that case, the insights you have gathered through this process will be extremely useful to those professionals.

Ready? Let's get started!

Part I

Adults' Feelings and Actions



Biting: A Tremendous Challenge

Biting is one of the most challenging behavior problems faced by parents and caregivers. Even the most experienced of early childhood educators struggle with persistent biting among toddlers, twos, and young preschoolers. A child who frequently bites creates severe stress for adults and can wreak havoc on an entire family or early childhood program. No other type of childhood aggression engenders the same kind of reaction from adults. Other children may be aggressive by pushing, kicking, hitting, or scratching, but they rarely get kicked out of the program for these behaviors. Biting, on the other hand, raises a huge red flag. Parents of both the child who bites and the child who is bitten are frantic and desperate for a speedy solution.

Any Child Can Become a Biter

- ▶ Ethan, an active and happy eighteen-month-old with a broad smile and an outgoing personality, had been biting others at child care for three months.
- ▶ Sophia, a highly verbal twenty-one-month-old with a challenging temperament, attempted to bite other children at child care on a daily basis.
- ▶ Lukas, a mild-mannered, nonverbal two-year-old, attended his mother's company child care center, biting her co-worker's children nearly every day.
- ▶ Elijah, a verbal and intellectually precocious three-year-old who attended a bilingual child care center, attempted to bite his classmates several times a day.
- ▶ Mia, a three-and-a-half-year-old with autism, bit newcomers to the program.

Parents and caregivers must work together

Dealing with a child who bites engenders a slew of difficult feelings, from blame and shame to confusion and anger. All of these can inhibit effective responses. Ideally, all adults who work with a child who bites will empathize with each other. They will act in a concerted, cohesive manner, leaving behind their own emotional baggage. It is important to appreciate and acknowledge each other's point of view and work together for the child's benefit. *Using this book together* will provide a road map for combining your efforts, making real progress to help the child and resolve the situation.

Track record for solving biting challenges

I am happy to say that throughout my consulting practice, when teachers and parents have used the methods in this book honestly and consistently, biting cases were resolved positively and very quickly.

While most of this book focuses on biting, these same techniques can be applied to any type of hurtful behavior. In fact, even if they aren't concerned with biting, parents, caregivers, and teachers will find valuable information for

understanding young children, as well as many techniques for proactively preventing various problem behaviors from ever developing. As I always say, if you can handle biting, you can handle anything!

Life with toddlers and twos

Toddlers and twos are relentlessly curious about other people, but at this age, they have little concept of anyone else's needs and wants. They are truly self-centered. When things don't go for them as expected, depending on their personality some are prone to act out or fight back through physical actions that can prove seriously hurtful to others. Impulse control is immature at this stage of development. Given certain circumstances, some children begin to rely on biting or aggression as a typical reaction to stress, especially in group settings.

Being with toddlers and two-year-olds is much like being on a rollercoaster ride, whether you are the parent, caregiver, or teacher. It can be awfully tough to maintain your balance. It's hard to be completely prepared for what you will find around the next bend. While children at this age are often hysterically funny and exhilarating to be around, you literally cannot take your eyes off of them because they are so likely to inadvertently get into trouble. Even though they have no concept of safety and don't know their physical limitations, they now have the physical capability to get pretty much anywhere on their own steam in a split second. It is exhausting trying to keep up with their boundless energy and curious nature! While they become more energetic, we grow more tired. Maybe toddlers have so much energy because they magically drain it right out of the adults in their lives!

How parents of children who bite feel

Parents are typically embarrassed by their child's behavior and at a loss as to how to stop it. Being responsible for behavior they cannot control is incredibly distressing. They may even feel ostracized by other parents. Some parents of children who bite overreact by instituting rigid punishments at home, continuing them long after the incident has passed. Others take the offensive,

Getting Parents on Board

When you are caring for a child who is hurtful to others, you want to get the parent(s) working together with you to solve the problem. Set up a time to talk privately. Bring notes from your observations and some initial ideas for stopping the behavior. Set the parent's mind at ease by being friendly and collaborative.

You might say, "Thanks for coming in today to meet with me about Conner. As you know, we love having Conner here. Right now we're worried about how he often bites children. Of course, some biting is a common occurrence in programs with young children. When it happens frequently with an individual child, however, it's a signal that it's time for us to take a closer look.

So, that's the purpose of our meeting today. I feel confident that through working together, we can figure out how to help Conner stop biting. Since you know Conner better than anyone, your point of view and involvement is critical to our success. I have found that using the Seven Questions [give parent a copy of the questions] gives us a clear problem-solving format. It's a good way to get to the heart of the issues so we can design a plan of action that will be exactly what Conner needs. Make sense?"

casting all blame on caregivers or on the early childhood program. Some may jump to the conclusion that their child has developmental issues. And others are ashamed, apologetic, and grateful to be in a program at all under these circumstances, bending over backwards to take any advice offered.

Getting Teachers on Board

As the parent of a child who is hurtful to others, you want to get the caregivers/teachers to work with you. Ask to have a private meeting with both the director of the program and your child's main caregiver or teacher. Come prepared with notes about your point of view concerning your child's biting. Be friendly and collaborative: everyone will have the same goal to work as a team on behalf of your child and the other children.

You might say, "Thanks for meeting with me about Daniella today. As you know, I love having Daniella attend your program. Right now, I'm worried about how often she bites others. While I know that small children commonly bite when stressed, I want to work with you to find a way to reduce her stressors and increase her ability to handle herself without biting.

I've recently discovered a book that focuses on biting, and I'd like to suggest that we work as a team and use this book to help Daniella and the other children. In this book there are Seven Questions [give everyone a copy of the Seven Questions] to ask ourselves to get at the root of the problem. I'm more than willing to do whatever I can to help. I hope we can get started on this together right away. Sound good?"

Some parents had their child evicted from child care before or have gone through several nannies. They may be afraid of losing their job, having had to miss many days of work due to lengthy child care searches. They may be worried about their child's social development, since these children are often shunned by other families, not invited to birthday parties and weekend playdates. While at work, parents may live in constant fear of getting another call from the caregiver asking to them to pick up the child who bit . . . again. Or, at the end of the day, they may feel anxious to encounter yet another incident report and the accompanying glare of the other parents.

How parents of bitten children feel

These parents may be outraged by their child's injury and concerned about permanent scarring, infection, or disease. They feel terrible because they are unable to protect their child and anxious about what they will encounter at the end of each day. At work, they live in fear of getting another call from the nanny or early childhood program, reporting yet another incident. Feelings of blame are common, as are concerns that they are not being taken seriously. Caregivers may have tried to calm them down by saying how normal and common biting is in groups of young children. Parents often hear this as a "wait-it-out" policy, with their child unwittingly acting as the bait for other children who are learning not to bite.

Some parents see biting as a deliberate act of aggression against their child; they want decisive action. They feel desperate and may want a guarantee from the child care program that their child will be protected from the child who bites, even separated from that child during play. They may demand that the biting child be punished in a certain fashion, suspended, or even expelled.

When biting happens at home while parents are taking care of two siblings or two friends, parents

may feel incredibly guilty and frustrated. There they are on site at the time of the bite, but may be unable to stop it from happening.

How those who take care of children feel

Caregivers, teachers, and directors of early childhood programs may be stumped by chronic biting problems. They may be about to give an ultimatum to the family, expelling the child if she or he can't stop biting soon. These professionals are in a particularly tough position. They are trying to meet the needs of all of the clients: the children, the parents of the child who bites, and the parents of the victim. They care deeply about the children in their program. And, of course, they also want to alleviate the situation as soon as possible before they lose customers and their reputation suffers.

Nannies, family child care providers, or babysitters are only a "force of one" when dealing with behavior problems. They feel especially vulnerable and alone when trying to deal with a persistent biting problem.

Whatever your role, *you are not alone*. Few adults feel comfortable handling this extremely challenging behavior, but together we can change that.



"We Don't Put Our Teeth on People!"

One night I got a phone call from a client of mine, Susan. She apologized for calling me in the evening, but explained that she needed to share an experience she just had with her 21-month-old daughter Lily. That evening Susan had been sharing a bubble bath with Lily. At one point, Susan had reached under the bubbles to find Lily's toes, leaning over to playfully nibble on them, saying "Yummy, I love toes!" All of a sudden, Lily stood upright in the tub, hands on hips, shouting at her mother, "Mommy, we don't put our teeth on people!"

Susan told me she was embarrassed to have been set straight by her toddler. She was also thrilled that her daughter had internalized a lesson we had been trying to teach her, to avoid her getting booted out of child care for her constant biting. On my website www.stopthefightingandbiting.com there are links to two original children's songs written by Travis and Barbara Poelle of The 2 Tones, which will help your child internalize these new lessons: "We Don't Put Our Teeth on People" and "Someone You Love (The Hug Song)." Lyrics to these songs can be found on pages 122–123 of this book.

Responding to Biting When It Happens

Most people who live or work with young children are always on the lookout for ideas on how to intervene effectively *during conflicts* between children. This chapter recommends effective ways to deal with these incidents, either at the point of the attempt or right after the incident has occurred. I call this *Instructive Intervention*.

In later chapters, I will explain how to ask the right questions to get at the roots of the biting problem. Coupling my Instructive Intervention technique immediately with proper detective work later through the Seven Questions will be the secret to your success.

Out with the old, before bringing in the new

Let's look at ineffective responses and why they don't work. You will replace these with Instructive Intervention (page 19).

Excessive reactions

Extreme misbehavior, such as biting, engenders a strong reaction from adults. They can feel baffled and helpless by children's violent outbursts. Often, adults are actually within arm's reach of the children at play and biting suddenly happens, right under their nose.

Adults sometimes find themselves ranting and lecturing when incidents happen. They feel incredibly tense and angry and try to make an impression about the *seriousness of the crime*. "How could you do that to your friend, Jose? How many times have I told you we don't hurt our friends? You know how to talk. Why can't you use your words? I can't believe this keeps happening!" These tirades give adults a chance to vent, but they can really ratchet up the stress level in the room. They cloud the issue by combining shame and guilt with a heavy dose of anger. Such an emotional performance can overwhelm the child, taking the focus away from the learning opportunities. Indeed, a strong, clear response is called for, one that is matter-of-fact, simple to follow, and calm.

Reasoning with the child

The most common response to hurtful behavior is the classic question, "How would you like it if someone did that to you?" Inevitably, toddlers look away uncomfortably and two-year-olds may say that they wouldn't like it. Continuing with what they think is a logical approach, adults say something like, "Well, then, you shouldn't do it to anyone else, either. It's not nice." Though perfectly reasonable to adults, this seemingly logical construction of thought means little to young children. Even if they appear to buy into the rationale for not hurting the other child, they haven't received any useful tools for the next time they are confronted with similar stressors. While it is admirable to

teach children to care about each other's feelings, this kind of inappropriate reasoning is not a discipline technique. It is no wonder that adults remain so confounded at the persistence of biting and fighting when this is their main recourse.

Putting toddlers in time-out

Some adults punish children with a time-out as a consequence for various infractions. In this technique, children are restricted to a particular spot for a set period of time, depriving them of the adult's attention. As a general rule, the child is sequestered this way for one minute per year of age. Time-outs can be successfully used with many preschoolers, but they are of limited value with children under the age of two and a half, who often see time-out as no more than simply a feature of their biting "routine." (They are also of limited or no value for children with special needs.) In fact, when biting is a frequent occurrence, many toddlers bite and then calmly *walk themselves over to the time-out spot* to pay penance for their crime. For them, it seems the crime is worth the punishment, frustrating parents and caregivers that much more.

Though a biting child should immediately be separated from the victim and other children, the adult's overarching message should be, "It is my job to keep people *safe*, so I can't let you *near people* right now" rather than a provocative "You're in *big* trouble now, buddy. Get in time-out!" Remember, the more concrete your message, the better it will be understood by young children.

Isolating children

Isolating the child who bites from the group for prolonged periods or all day may seem like a good solution on the surface, but it addresses only the short-term need. Children who act out still need to be around other children in order to learn alternatives to their biting. Of course, this requires careful supervision by adults. This behavioral experience is necessary to reinforce behavioral changes. Only when parents and caregivers do their part to reduce stressors and model effective responses can children learn new strategies to deal with their problems and get along better with others.

What to Say and Do Instead

Instructive Intervention

Instructive Intervention is a short, to-the-point technique for dealing with biting the moment it occurs. It has seven parts:

1. Interrupt the behavior.
2. Help the child who was bitten.
3. Reflect both children's feelings.
4. Define the problem.
5. Clarify the limit.
6. Provide solutions.
7. Re-engage in play.

When used consistently, this technique is very helpful to children who lack skills to solve their own problem. It also provides security for them as there is obviously an adult around who knows what to do every time there is a problem.

Instructive Intervention tools

On page 21, you will find the “Instructive Intervention Guide,” the sequence of steps to deal with biting immediately. Keep a copy of this page near you for quick reference when biting occurs. It will help you be consistent and effective.

The “Puppet Show Script” on page 22 is a parent or teacher tool you can use anytime when children are calm and likely to be receptive to new information. You will teach children some ways to handle intense feelings without biting. Role play like this really captures young children’s attention—“live” entertainment on a familiar topic, as it were.

Practice makes it easier

Practice what you plan to say during future biting incidents. Included in this book are two tools to help you as you learn new intervention coaching skills. The “Sample Intervention Dialogue” handout can be found in Appendix IV on page 120. Photocopy this handout and use it as a sample of how to include critical messages, as you develop your personal style of intervention. The “Biting Solution Pocket Guide” in Appendix V on page 121 is a handy pocket version of the critical

messages. It can be photocopied and laminated to distribute to relevant teachers and parents. Invite others to notice when you use your newly acquired techniques, then discuss the process together. Be patient while people learn a new style of intervention. Expect that using unfamiliar phrases and messages will feel uncomfortable at first.

Treating a Bite Wound

If the skin is not broken, there is no cause for concern of infection. The site of the bite will be painful, and after you wash it off with soap and water, put ice or ice packs on it. You can also use frozen sponges or ice wrapped in washcloths. Small bags of frozen peas in a clean cloth or plastic bag are also popular because they conform to the shape of the body.

- ▶ First wash your own hands and then wash the wound with warm, soapy water.

After the wound is cleaned, it is best if you can leave it exposed to open air for a while. If you are concerned it may get dirt in it, cover it with a bandage.

- ▶ In a bite that *breaks the skin* on the fingers or hands, bacteria may come into contact with tendons. When such bites occur, *children should be seen by medical personnel*. The situation is not an emergency, but the child should see a doctor as soon as possible.

Getting to the root of the problem

Seven Questions

Moving on to Part II, you will find a discussion and how-to of the Seven Questions that will help you get to the root of the biting problem. At the end of each of the next seven short chapters, you will check off the issues that pertain to the child who is biting. This information will provide the foundation for your customized Action Plan in due course.

Injury and Incident Reports

Also useful are Injury and Incident reports. Unfortunately, often an Injury Report form is filled out by caregivers in a rather perfunctory manner, only recording information of *when* and *how* the victim was hurt and a description of the *care* provided afterward. It is best when adults can write a clear description of the play situation *prior to the injury*, to capture vital information for solving the problem. (Frequently there are no details recorded

INSTRUCTIVE INTERVENTION GUIDE

1. Interrupt the behavior:
 - *“No biting. Sit down right here in this spot. We’ll talk about it in a minute.”*
2. Help the victim:
 - *“I know that really hurt. Here, let me help you feel better.”*
3. Reflect both children’s feelings:
 - *[To child who bit] “I can see that you felt frustrated and angry.”*
 - *[To child who was bitten] “And you felt scared and then sad.”*
4. Define the problem:
 - *“I see the problem—you both wanted to play with the same doll at the very same time. That was the problem.”*
5. Clarify the limit:
 - *“We always touch people gently, even when we’re upset or angry. If you hurt people, you’ll have to stay next to me. I won’t let you play with the children when you hurt them.”*
6. Provide two relevant solutions to the child who bit, one for expressing feelings and one for needs. Select and match an age-appropriate suggestion to each incident:
 - *“Next time you feel upset, you can...”*
 - ▶ Take a big, deep breath, like blowing out a candle
 - ▶ Clench your teeth and make a ‘grrrr’ sound
 - ▶ Breathe in and out through your front teeth
 - ▶ Squeeze your fists together tightly
 - *“You can tell the other child...”*
 - ▶ “I don’t like that!”
 - ▶ “I need that next, ok?”
 - ▶ “No grabbing—I’m using this right now!”
 - ▶ “How many minutes until you’re done?”
 - ▶ “Want to trade that for this...?”

For toddlers and twos, suggest shorter phrases they can manage:

 - ▶ “Be careful!”
 - ▶ “Move over!”
 - ▶ “Stop it!”
 - ▶ “No” or “Hey!”
7. Put closure on the situation and re-engage in play:
 - *“Remember, you can always say ‘Help!’ and a teacher will come to you. I’m glad you’re all done biting. Let’s go do...”*

PUPPET SHOW SCRIPT

This script is a tool for teachers and parents to use in illustrating how children can deal with the difficult feelings that arise in hurtful incidents. You will need two puppets or stuffed animals and one toy/item small enough for a puppet to hold. One adult can operate both puppets, while another adult plays the role of “Teacher.”

Dog: “*Hey, look!*” [Shakes a tambourine]

Bear: [Runs over to Dog] “*I want that!*” [Grabs at tambourine]

Dog: “*Augggh!*” [Screams, struggling to hold on]

Bear: “*No . . . It’s mine!*” [Bear bites Dog’s paw and Dog lets go]

Dog: [Cries]

Teacher: “*What’s going on over here? Bear, sit down and stay right here. I can’t let you play near Dog when you hurt him.*” [Teacher separates Bear from Dog. She goes over to Dog and pretends to wash his paw and put ice on it]

Teacher: “*Oh, Dog, I’ll bet you felt scared and sad. Here is some nice cold ice to make your paw feel better. I’m sorry you were hurt. Listen, Dog, here is an idea for you. When someone tries to take something from you, you can say, ‘No’ or ‘Stop’ in a loud voice. Can you try that?* [Dog says ‘Stop’ loudly] *Yes, that’s great! Let’s go talk to Bear now.*”

Teacher: “*Bear, we need to talk about what happened. You felt mad at Dog because he wouldn’t give you the tambourine.*”

Bear: “*I wanted it!*” [Bear shouts at Dog]

Teacher: “*Right, you did. Then, Dog felt scared when you grabbed it and sad when you hurt him.*”

Dog: “*I don’t like that!*” [Dog screams at Bear]

Teacher: “*Right, you didn’t like that. So, Bear, the problem is you really wanted the tambourine that Dog was using. It’s hard to wait for a turn. But even when we’re upset or mad, we still touch others gently.*”

Bear: “*Hummph!*” [Looks away, still feeling unhappy]

Teacher: “*Listen, Bear, I have an idea for you. When you want a toy that someone else has you can take big belly breaths to calm yourself while you wait. Watch me take a belly breath: I’m going to breathe in and blow out my mad feelings.* [Teacher takes a deep breath, then blows out as long as possible] *Let’s all practice belly breaths.* [Teacher, Bear, and Dog practice] *Can you two try that again?* [Both Bear and Dog breathe and blow] *Yes, very good belly breaths!*” [Bear and Dog are calmer]

Teacher: “*Bear, you can also come and ask me for help. You can say, ‘I want the toy Dog has.’ We’ll ask Dog to let you have it when he is finished. I will help you wait for your turn. Okay, it looks like Bear feels better and Dog feels better, too. Let’s go play!*”

on these forms specifically about the child who bites. The biter's identity is typically kept confidential because these forms may be given to the injured child's parents.)

If your child bites, ask to see all of the Injury and Incident reports. See if you can detect any patterns, such as biting that always happens at a certain time of day or during a certain activity. These can be important clues to your child's behavior. You may find helpful clues through reviewing patterns associated with attempts to bite.

Action Plan

After you have studied the Seven Questions and any available Injury and/or Incident reports, you will use the Action Plan worksheet to outline changes that are needed to stop the biting. We'll talk more about how to develop the Action Plan later. Just remember that as long as adults agree on the goals and the techniques to reach them, your child will be surrounded by a powerful support system as he or she learns new skills and stops biting.