

## **Biological Influences on Behavior Problems**

**By Kathleen A. Platzman, Ph.D.**

The day care center has called to let you know that your 2 year-old is biting her friends! You've always noticed that she bites when very frustrated, but it seems lately at home (and now at day-care) she's biting all the time. You don't know if her biting is from frustration, or wanting attention, or what. Regardless, the day care center is saying that she has to stop. What to do? Punish her when she bites? (That makes you uncomfortable.) Put her in "time-out"? (How do you make a two year old understand that biting sent her to the time out chair?) Give her an alternative object to bite? (Doesn't that just give her the message that it's OK to bite?) Tell her to "use her words"? (Her language skills seem to regress when she is upset.) Try to remove all frustrating experiences from her life? (That's just unrealistic.)

Although all toddlers don't bite to express frustration, unwanted behaviors are common in developing children. Solutions found in "self-help" books don't always work. Oftentimes friends or relatives offer ineffective strategies, and parents can become discouraged. Before you start to intervene with your child, it is often helpful to figure out if there might be any underlying biological factors at play. Ask yourself these questions:

Is my child feeling well? Your child might feel sick or tired. With minimum energy it is difficult to curb her frustration and not misbehave. It is easy to see when a child has a cold or fever and therefore needs to rest at home and recover. But sometimes she might feel under the weather from more subtle and chronic conditions (e.g. chronic ear infections or food sensitivities).

Is my child overly sensitive to some sensations (e.g. noises, new flavors and smells, clothing textures)? Your child might be overly sensitive to every-day sights, sounds, touches, odors or tastes. By the end of the day she may be exhausted from all the loud noises, strong odors, and irritating skin sensations common in everyday life, and behavior melt-down is likely. If she seems overly sensitive, you might need to reduce or eliminate those things that bother her.

How developed is her language? If language is developing slowly, your child may need those around her to speak slowly and simply when addressing her, or increase nonverbal aspects of communication (e.g. pointing). Supporting communication skills will provide new ways of self-expression and thus reduce frustration.

Is she well coordinated? Visual-spatial and visual-motor skills might also be developing slowly. If your child finds it difficult to find things, is messy, dislikes puzzles or drawing, or is clumsy, her coordination may be making life difficult at the moment. She may need her environment more simple and orderly so she can make sense out of it. She may also need her environment to expect less in terms of motor skills.

All of these difficulties can be mild, moderate or severe. If you feel that you need professional advice, you may wish to speak to your pediatrician, or seek a developmental, speech/language, or occupational therapy evaluation. When you have understood your child's biological profile and challenges, you can better design and implement behavioral programs to reduce and eliminate unwanted behavior.

For further information regarding this article please contact the Maternal Substance Abuse and Child Development Project, Emory University School of Medicine, Department of Psychiatry and Behavioral Sciences, Emory West Campus, 1256 Briarcliff

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