

LOVE AT FIRST BITE

by

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Occasionally, my dear friend, Laura, to whom I confide all my parenting problems, looks me right in the eye and says, "Aren't you supposed to be an expert in this?" It's true that as a marriage counselor who specializes in working with the families of young children, I spend a lot of time teaching and helping parents. But I'm far from being a perfect parent. Raising children is a delicate and complicated business. As soon as you think you have the answers, the questions change.

I have three sons. My eldest provides me with the biggest challenges, probably because each time he goes through developmental stage it's a brand new one for me. When he was small, he was extremely aggressive. I don't know where he got it from — maybe it has something to do with that 'Y' chromosome. He started biting while he was nursing at about four months old. By the time he'd reached 10 months, I'd finally figured out how to stop the behavior by putting him down and leaving the room whenever he bit, and I thought the problem was solved. This lasted about a year. Then he started to bite his little friend — and hit her, and pull her hair, and kick her, and grab the toys.

What had I done to deserve this? I became increasingly frustrated and angry. When it first started happening, I would say, "No, no, honey, no biting." This didn't work, so I did it a little louder. "NO! DON'T YOU EVER BITE HER!" The biting continued, so I brought out the serious punishments. I tried everything. I yelled. I took things away. I grabbed him and took him to another room. I held the door for endless time-outs with my two-year-old kicking and screaming hysterically. Nothing worked. In fact, his aggressive behavior got worse. In one afternoon with his little friend, I counted 23 bites, kicks and scratches.

I talked with everyone I knew, to blow off steam and try to find some answers. People told me that boys were all aggressive and that this was just a stage. Others suggested a variety of crueler punishments, but I refused to slap my baby, or to bite him back. (My father said, "But, it worked with you, sweetie!")

Finally, my friend Laura gave me the best advice of all. "Well," she said, "If one of your clients came to you with this problem, what would you tell them?"

That turned the whole thing around for me. I got some distance from the problem and suddenly saw exactly what I had been doing wrong. I'd been trying to put

that proverbial old square peg into the round hole. When the peg didn't fit, I tried pushing it in, and when that didn't work, I got out the sledge hammer.

The system of punishments and rewards as a way to control children's behavior is so prevalent in our culture that even die-hard anti-authoritarian parents like me can fall into the trap when we aren't paying attention. My gentle verbal consequence hadn't worked, so I'd brought out my arsenal of more and more severe punishments. I'd lost sight of the fact that if a little punishment doesn't work, a lot won't work any better. In fact, excess punishment almost always makes things worse.

Normal children are intrinsically motivated to learn how to get along. They are hard-wired to gain information from the natural consequences in their environment and, for the most part, they do an excellent job of learning all of our complex social rules in a relatively short amount of time. When toddlers misbehave consistently, it's usually for one of two reasons: either they are testing to see how much power they have, or they feel badly, physically or emotionally, and lose control.

A mild natural or logical consequence, consistently applied, works extremely well for testing. For instance, my son decided as soon as he would walk that he loved to toddle down the slope of our lawn and into the street. Part of the fun was watching Mom's horrified reaction. For that, the consequence was that he would have to go inside the house immediately, because I couldn't trust him outside. A couple of tantrums later, the problem was solved.

However, when a small child misbehaves because he is ill or feels insecure, frustrated or sad, it does absolutely no good to punish him. Sometimes even a mild negative consequence can serve to make the child feel worse and cause him act out even more.

It was clear that my son and I had a vicious cycle going. The angrier I got about his biting, the more anxious he got. And the only thing he knew to do when he was anxious was — you guessed it — bite. I had to put away my sledge hammer and try something radically different.

Inspired, I dropped all the punishments and decided to use encouragement instead. Even in 1988, this was not a new concept — Don Dinkmeyer and Gary McKay had been pushing encouragement for years in their STEP courses and their book, *Raising the Responsible Child*. I knew about it and had used it successfully with my clients and my own children. Instead of punishing misbehavior or using artificial rewards, one simply uses words to encourage the opposite, more positive, behavior.

“Playing gently” was something my son couldn’t do while he was biting his friend, so I decided to encourage that. In fact, since both children had a part in keeping the aggressions going, I felt it was a good idea to encourage them both. At random, over the course of the first afternoon, I said to them, “I notice you guys are playing gently,” or “Thank you for playing so gently with your friend.” Sometimes, I’d give them a little hug or kiss, too. I was sincere. I was truly grateful. This totally changed the atmosphere when we were together. Instead of hovering, waiting to pounce at the first sign of aggression, I could relax, my son could relax, and we all could have fun together.

The very first day I tried encouragement, my toddler’s biting behavior went from 23 bites in an afternoon, to one. It seemed he couldn’t help but bite his friend as she was on her way out the door! But that was the last bite. I kept up the encouragement for a couple of weeks, although with much less frequency. After a while, I forgot all about it, but my son would turn to me occasionally and say proudly, “We’re playing gently, Mommy!”

For another child and another mother, encouragement might not work in a single afternoon. My advice to other parents is not, “Try encouragement, it *always* works,” but “Step back and look at the problem outside the heat of the moment — you don’t have to be an ‘expert’ to know what’s right for you and your child, you just have to give yourself the time and space to make sure you’re acting instead of just reacting.” So, if you have a little biter, use my experience as one example of what you might do, gather more advice, then go with what appeals to the wisest part of your heart. And if what you try doesn’t work, stop, think about it, and try something completely different. But please, for my sake, don’t bite the baby!

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