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# Understanding and Responding to Children Who Bite

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Biting is a typical behavior often seen in infants, toddlers, and 2-year olds. As children mature, gain self-control, and develop problem-solving skills, they usually outgrow this behavior. While not uncommon, biting can be an upsetting and potentially harmful behavior that should be discouraged from the very first episode. This article will help you to understand the reasons young children bite and give you ideas and strategies for responding appropriately.

## Why do young children bite?

There are many reasons why children may bite. A child might bite to

- Relieve pain from teething.
- Explore cause and effect (“What happens when I bite?”).
- Experience the sensation of biting.
- Satisfy a need for oral-motor stimulation.
- Communicate needs and desires, such as hunger or fatigue.
- Communicate or express difficult feelings, such as frustration, anger, confusion, or fear (“There are too many people here and I feel cramped”).
- Imitate other children and adults.
- Feel strong and in control.
- Get attention.
- Act in self-defense.

Some children bite instinctively, because they have not developed self-control. For example, when 3-year-old Marcus grabs a doll from his 2-year-old sister Gina, her first response is to bite him and grab the doll. She doesn’t stop to think about other ways to act or the result of her actions.

## What can families do to prevent biting?

There are many things that families can do to prevent biting. Families can

- Have age-appropriate expectations for your child's behavior.
- Make sure your child's schedule, routine, and transitions are predictable and consistent.
- Offer activities and materials that allow your child to relax and release tension.
- Use positive guidance strategies to help your child develop self-control.
- Provide items to bite, such as teething rings or clean, wet, cold washcloths stored in the refrigerator.

## How should I respond when my child bites?

While every situation is different, here are some general guidelines for responding when a child bites.

### Infants

Infants learn about the world around them by exploring it with their hands, eyes, and mouths. But infants need help to learn what they should and shouldn't bite.

If your infant takes an experimental bite on a mother's breast or a teacher's shoulder, stay calm and use clear signals to communicate that it is not okay for one person to bite another. A firm "no" or "no biting!" is an appropriate response.

### Toddlers and Preschoolers

Toddlers have many strong emotions that they are just learning to manage. Toddlers may bite to express anger or frustration or because they lack the language skills to express their feelings.

Biting is less common in preschoolers than toddlers. When a preschooler bites, it may be due to something at home or at the program that is causing the child to be upset, frustrated, confused, or afraid. A preschooler may also bite to get attention or to act in self-defense.

Follow the steps below with both toddlers and preschoolers.

1. If you are a witness to the biting incident, move quickly to the scene and get down to children's level. Respond to the child who did the biting. In a serious, firm tone make a strong statement: "No biting. Biting hurts. I can't let you hurt Josie or anyone else." Next, offer a choice: "You can help make Josie feel better, or you can sit quietly until I can talk with you." Help the child follow through on the choice if necessary.
2. Respond to the child who was hurt by offering comfort through words and actions: "I'm sorry you are hurting. Let's get some ice." Perform first aid if

- necessary. The child who did the biting can help comfort the bitten child—if both parties agree. Help the child who was hurt find something to do.
3. Finally, talk to the child who did the biting. Maintain eye contact and speak in simple words using a calm, firm tone of voice. Try to find out what happened that led to the incident. Restate the rule, “Biting is not allowed.” Model the use of words that describe feelings: “Kim took your ball. You felt angry. You bit Kim. I can’t let you hurt Kim. No biting.” Discuss how the child can respond in similar situations in the future.

## **What if biting becomes a habit for my child?**

If biting becomes a habit for your child and ongoing positive guidance is not effective, it is time to set up a meeting with your child’s teacher(s). Together, you can plan an approach for addressing the behavior that can be applied consistently at home and at the program. Together, you can discuss and define the behavior and find the cause behind it. Next you and the teachers can develop a plan to address the causes and help your child to replace biting with acceptable behaviors. Try the plan for several weeks, but be patient. It takes time to change behaviors that have become habits. Keep in touch with your child’s teacher(s) to share information about changes in behavior. After several weeks, evaluate the plan’s effectiveness and make changes as needed.

## **What strategies can I use to help my child overcome a habit of biting?**

Here are some strategies parents and adults can use to address a child’s biting habit.

- Observe your child to learn where, when, and in what situations biting occurs. Sometimes an adult may need to stay close to the child to prevent biting.
- Pay attention to signals. Stay close and step in if your child seems ready to bite.
- Suggest acceptable ways to express strong feelings. Help your child learn to communicate her wants and needs (“Amy, tell your sister you were still playing with the truck”).
- Use a reminder system to help your child learn to express strong feelings with appropriate words and actions (“Tell Manuel that you don’t like it when he gets that close to you”).
- Reinforce positive behavior by acknowledging child’s appropriate words and actions (“You didn’t like being tickled so you used your words to ask me to stop”).
- Provide opportunities for your child to make choices and feel empowered.
- Be sure your behavior expectations are age-appropriate and individually appropriate for your child. Inappropriate expectations can cause children to feel stress, and stress can lead to biting.
- Offer foods with a variety of textures to meet your child’s sensory needs.
- Teach your child words for setting limits, such as “no,” “stop,” or “that’s mine.”

## **What strategies are not helpful?**

These strategies should not be used to address a child's biting habit.

- Avoid labeling a child as a "biter." Negative labels can affect how you view the child, and even impact the way the child feels about him- or herself.
- Never bite a child back to punish or show him how it feels to be bitten. Biting a child tells him that using violence is an acceptable behavior that can be used to solve problems.
- Avoid getting angry, yelling, or shaming the child.
- Avoid giving too much attention to the child who bites after an incident. While this is usually negative attention, it can still be reinforcing and cause a child to repeat the biting behavior.
- Do not force a child who bit and the child who was hurt to play together.
- Do not punish children who bite. Punishment does not help children to learn discipline and self-control. Instead, it makes children angry, upset, defiant, and embarrassed. It also undermines the relationship between you and the child.

### For further reading

Banks, R., & S. Yi. 2007. Dealing with biting behaviors in young children. Clearinghouse on Early Education and Parenting. <http://ceep.crc.uiuc.edu/poptopics/biting.html> [1].

The Center on Social and Emotional Foundations for Early Learning (CSEFEL). Responding to your child's bite. [http://www.vanderbilt.edu/csefel/documents/biting-parenting\\_tool.pdf](http://www.vanderbilt.edu/csefel/documents/biting-parenting_tool.pdf) [2].

Crisalli, L. 2008. All about biting. *Exchange* 184: 61–63. <http://www.ccie.com/library/5018461.pdf> [3].

Kinnell, G. 2008. *No biting: Policy and practice for toddler programs*. 2nd ed. St. Paul, MN: Redleaf Press.

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University of Maine Center for Community Inclusion and Disability Studies. Ouch! That hurts! – Biting. (Growing ideas tip sheet) <http://www.ccids.umaine.edu/ec/growingideas/bitingtip.htm> [4]

Zero to Three. Chew on this: Responding to toddlers who bite. <http://www.zerotothree.org/child-development/challenging-behavior/chew-o...> [5].

### Credit

Adapted from D. Koralek, "Understanding and Responding to Biting," in *Classroom Strategies to Promote Children's Social and Emotional Development* (Lewisville, NC: Kaplan Press, 1999), 135-138. © 1999 The Devereux Foundation, Villanova, Pennsylvania.

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[3] <http://www.ccie.com/library/5018461.pdf>

[4] <http://www.ccids.umaine.edu/ec/growingideas/bitingtip.htm>

[5] <http://www.zerotothree.org/child-development/challenging-behavior/chew-on-this-resources-on-biting.html>

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