



Understanding and Responding to Children Who Bite

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. It's best to discourage it from the very first episode. This article will help you to understand the reasons young children bite and give you some ideas and strategies for responding appropriately.

Why do young children bite?

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. But there are many other 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.
- Imitate other children and adults.
- Feel strong and in control.
- Get attention.
- Act in self-defense.
- 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").

What can families do to prevent biting?

There are a variety of things that families can do to prevent biting. It helps to:

- Have age-appropriate expectations for your child's behavior based on his or her current skills and abilities.
- Make sure your child's schedule, routines, and transitions are predictable and consistent. At meal and bedtimes, try to do things in the same way and at the same times. Young children thrive when they know what will happen next.
- Offer activities and materials that allow your child to relax and release tension. Some children like yoga or deep breathing. Offer play dough, foam balls, bubbles, soft music, and other stress-reducing items.
- Use positive guidance strategies to help your child develop self-control. For example, offer gentle reminders, phrased in a way that tells them what behaviors are expected. "Be sure to hang up your coat on the hook." "You can each have a bucket to use in the sandbox." "Put a small dot of toothpaste on your brush. You won't need much to get your teeth clean."
- Provide items to bite, such as teething rings or clean, wet, cold washcloths stored in the refrigerator. This helps children learn what they can bite safely, without hurting anyone else.

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 often need help to learn what they should and shouldn't bite. If your infant takes an experimental bite on a mother's breast or grandpa'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 needed 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 their child care 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 see 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.

For further reading

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