

WHEN YOUNG CHILDREN BITE

Teething, frustration, and anxiety are only some of the reasons young children bite. By understanding the reasons and being aware of possible solutions, you can help.

Biting is very common among young children—becoming a problem for one out of ten toddlers. Naturally, biting often alarms and upsets parents. If your child has bitten another child, chances are you are feeling embarrassed or frustrated. If your child has been bitten, you may feel outraged or powerless. You may also fear for your child's safety.

Why do infants and toddlers bite?

Biting occurs for different reasons under different circumstances with different children. The first step in learning to control biting is to examine why it may be happening. Take the time to look for patterns in the child's environment and emotional state at each episode.

- Sometimes, young children bite simply because they explore people the same way they explore objects: by touching, tugging, squeezing, and sometimes biting them. If you give an infant a toy, one of the first places it goes is into the mouth. "Mouthing" things is something that all children do. Very young children do not fully understand the difference between mouthing on an object and biting someone.
- Children begin teething around four to seven months. Gums can be sore and cause a great deal of pain. Infants sometimes find relief from this discomfort by chewing on something. Sometimes that object is a real person.
- Around 12 months of age, children become more interested in what happens when they do something. When they bang the spoon on the high chair tray, they discover it makes a loud sound. They may also discover that when they bite someone, they get a loud scream.
- Older toddlers may also bite to get attention. When children are in situations where they are not receiving enough positive attention and interaction, they often find ways to make others take notice. Being ignored is not fun. Biting is a quick way to become the center of attention, even if it is negative attention.
- Older toddlers love to imitate others. Watching others and trying to do what they do is a great way to learn things. Sometimes children see others bite and decide to try it out themselves. When an adult bites a child back as punishment, it does not stop the biting. Instead, it teaches the child that biting is okay.
- Many parents show affection with their children by nibbling on their toes, ears, etc. Children may in return intend to show this same affection to their peers. Imagine their surprise, and that of their playmate, when that nibble ends up being a bite.

- Toddlers are trying to be independent. “Mine” and “no” are favorite words. Learning to do things on their own, making their own choices and needing control over a situation is part of their growing up. Biting is a powerful way to control others. If a child wants a toy or someone to leave him alone or move out of the way, biting is a quick way to get what he wants.
- Young children experience a lot of frustration. Toddlers do not have good control over their bodies. A loving pat sometimes becomes a push. They cannot talk well, and often have trouble asking for

things and requesting help. They haven’t learned to share, wait for turns, or to play well with others. At times, when they can’t find words to express their feelings, they resort to hitting, pushing or biting.

- A child’s world is very stressful. A lack of daily routine, interesting things to do, or consistent adult interactions, are stressful situations for children. Children also experience stress in events such as divorce, birth of a new sibling, or moving to a new home. Biting is one way they may express feelings and relieve tension.

What can you do?

You can take many steps to eliminate biting when it occurs. First, take a look at the situation itself. When did the biting occur? Who was involved? Where did it happen? What happened before or after the biting took place? Does there seem to be a pattern?

- If you determine that the biting occurs as the result of exploration or teething, provide your child with teething rings or something appropriate for chewing on.
- If your child seems to bite when he is tired or hungry, look at the daily routine to be sure that he is getting enough sleep and nourishment. You may also want to look at the times of day that your child sleeps and eats. Do they need some adjustment?
- If the biting occurs when two children are fighting over a toy, keep more than one of the same toy available. It does not work to make very young children share or wait their turns. Toddlers do not have the skills to negotiate or understand another’s point of view.
- If attention seems to be the main reason for biting, try to spend time with your child when he is doing more positive things. Snuggling up and reading a book together or rolling a ball back and forth is so much more fun than receiving a scolding.
- If your child is biting because of stressful situations, make everyday life as supportive and normal as possible. Predictable meals, bedtimes, and extra time with a loving parent can help. Often, activities such as rolling, squishing and pounding play dough or relaxing and splashing in the bathtub are great ways to relieve tension.
- If your child is biting because he is frustrated, provide easier toys and activities for him. Decrease the number of other children around him, or shorten the playtime.
- Teach your child to say “no” if another child is doing something he does not like. Give her positive reinforcement when she communicates effectively. Watch for signs of rising frustration. Spotting potential conflict may help you intercept a potential situation.

- When a child bites, show him (with your voice and facial expression) that biting is unacceptable. Speak firmly and look directly into your child's eyes. You might say, "No, it's not okay to bite. It hurts when you bite. John is crying. I won't let you bite him or anyone else, and I won't let anyone bite you." If your child is able to talk, you might also say, "You can tell John with your words that you need him to move instead of biting him. Say, 'Please, move, John!'"
- Have the child who did the biting to help wash, bandage and comfort the victim. Making her a part of the comforting process is a good way to teach nurturing behaviors.
- Whenever a child is out of control, you will need to restrain or isolate him until he calms down. Insist on a "time out" or "think about it" period. Wait a few minutes until things are under control, and then talk to the child about his behavior.
- NEVER hit or "bite back" a child for biting. This communicates that biting is an appropriate way to handle emotion. The disciplinary approach should be calm. A child should not experience any reward for biting, not even the reward of negative attention.

Biting can be an uncomfortable issue for parents. Although it is serious and not to be tolerated, it is quite normal in very young children.

- If your child is in an early care and education program, it is imperative to work together with your child's caregiver.
- If children are permitted to bite at home, it will be difficult to prevent it from happening in care.
- It is important to know what your child's caregiver is doing to keep your child and others safe. The caregiver should be knowledgeable and aware of these types of situations.
- Dealing with a child who bites can be challenging, but positive efforts will help the child take one more step toward independence and self control.

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