



Biting

Why Children Bite

Biting is alarming to parents because we don't expect our children to be bitten - or to bite. We think of biting as a vicious act, not as something a small child would do.

Why does biting happen? What can and should be done?

Parents and caregivers who have been successful in dealing with biting have found that it helps to start with some basic understandings:

- As upsetting and as wrong as it is, biting is not unusual toddler behavior, especially when toddlers are in groups.
- Toddlers bite for many reasons, most of which are related to the development of children at this age.
- When toddlers bite, the most effective way to get them to stop is an approach that combines observation, understanding, teaching, and environmental changes.

Reasons Toddlers May Bite

The reasons toddlers may bite fall into three general categories:

- Biting related to development
- Biting related to expressing feelings
- Biting related to a difficult environment



Development

Toddler development has been described as an "explosion" because toddlers develop so many new skills and abilities at once. They are driven to try out their new abilities, like getting other people to understand what they are saying, which can be frustrating, and they need help from adults. All of this can result in a toddler becoming overwhelmed, which may cause her/him to bite. Toddlers may also bite as a result of

- teething pain;
- experimenting with the movement of their mouths as they learn to chew and swallow without choking;

- exploring everything around them using all their senses - including mouthing toys and people;
- feeling that others are too close because they don't yet have a good understanding of the space around them;
- their developing autonomy - that is, feeling a sense of independence and power;
- struggling to be understood as they learn to talk;
- imitating adults who say they love them so much, they could "just eat you up".

Expressing feelings

Toddlers are easily frustrated and do not have much self-control. They are likely to bite when they are feeling

- Frustrated or angry;
- Anxious or tense about situations they don't understand;
- Excited even for happy reasons.



Environment

Toddlers may bite when they are in environments that don't meet their physical and emotional needs. They bite when they experience

- Overstimulation and overcrowding;
- Inappropriate expectations, such as having to wait;
- A schedule that doesn't meet their needs.

Best Responses to Biting

In a child care setting, adults must respond to both the child who bit and the child who was bitten.

The child who was bitten needs:

- **comfort and care** - This includes first aid for the bite and tender comforting. When the skin is not broken, caregivers should offer ice or cold packs to relieve the pain of the bite. When the skin is broken, first aid should include careful washing of the wound and, if the child wants, ice or cold packs for the pain.
- **reassurance and recognition** - The child needs to hear that it was not right and not fair that he was bitten. Teachers should tell the child, "Someone bit you. That's not right. It hurts, and no one should bite you." Even though adults may want the child who bit to apologize, apologizing doesn't make much of an impression on toddlers and doesn't help stop the biting.
- **advice and support** - If the child is able to talk, teachers can help her/him learn to loudly say "no" or "stop" if she/he is worried someone will hurt her/him. The child can also learn to put up her hand, palm out, like a traffic officer. This is also powerful "stop" message,

teacher can support her. "Good for you. You were worried someone might hurt you, and you said, 'no'". If a child is bitten as a result of retaliation by another child, the teacher can help the bitten child understand the situation. "When you hit him, he bites you. We don't want to hurt anyone - hitting or biting." Saying this doesn't suggest the child deserved to be bitten, but does relate important information to him because, like all toddlers, he is learning about cause and effect.

The Child who bites needs:

- **a clear message of disapproval** - No matter the reason for the bite, biting is never the right thing to do. Adults must use a serious tone of voice and specific words so that the child knows what he/she did was wrong. The message must be brief, specific, and serious.
- **an understanding of how biting has affected the other child** - The child needs to know that his bite hurt the other child, and that it's not okay to hurt people. It is important for the child to understand the effect of his biting. Adults need to talk about this in a manner that is clear, calm, serious, and brief.
- **advice about what she/he should do instead of biting** - Adults should teach the child how to ask for what she/he wants. Adults should help the child learn how to communicate feelings of power by expressing her/herself through body language, facial expression, and words rather than through biting.
- **redirection or resulting action that relates to the reason for the bite** - For example, if a child bit in order to get a toy away from another child, the toy should be taken away from the biter.
- **adults to look at the situation and the environment** - Adults need to consider the reasons the child bit and possible changes they might make to address them. For example, the environment maybe crowded, so adults could rearrange the room to provide more space. Or, there may not be enough sensory activities to help toddlers relieve frustration and anxiety, so adults could add sensory materials and experiences.

Centers that are serious about working on biting keep the name of the child who bit confidential. This helps the teachers focus all their energy on strategies to help the child rather than on naming and blaming.

If Your Child Is Being Bitten

No matter how much any of us knows and understands about biting, it is still frightening and upsetting when our own child is bitten. Parents may want to focus their attention on punishing the child who bit or even on punishing the child's parents. This is understandable, but it doesn't help the biting situation.

If your child has been bitten, here are ways you can help:

- Ask your child's teachers what strategies they are using to help the child who bit learn to stop.
- Ask your child's teachers what strategies they are using to help keep your child safe. If the teachers mention

specific advice and support, use the same ideas and language when you talk with your child.

- Take your cue from your child. If your child seems worried, let her/him hear you talk with the teacher about how you will both help keep her/him safe. If she/he seems to have forgotten the biting, do not keep bringing it up. Instead, if you still have concerns, talk with the teacher by yourself.

If Your Child Is Biting

You may feel responsible for your toddler's biting and want to do something about it at home. Nevertheless, most of the work will be done in your child's program because that's where the biting is happening. Toddlers are more likely to bite when they are in groups than when they are at home.

Here are ways you can help your child's teachers as they work on the biting:

- Share any ideas you may have about the reasons your child is biting.
- If you play with your child by pretending to "I can eat you," stop for a while because he/she may be trying to imitate you while actually biting.
- Learn how to effectively express disapproval for biting.
- Help your child develop language skills and learn to appropriately express her/his feelings.
- Avoid lectures, punishments, rewards, or bribes. They don't help to stop the biting.

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