

Biting in the Toddler Years



Most common reasons and solutions for biting

The Experimental Biter: It is not uncommon for an infant or toddler to explore their world, including people, by biting. Infants and toddlers place many items in their mouths to learn more about them. Teach the child that some things can be bitten, like toys and food, and some things cannot be bitten, like people and animals.

Another example of the Experimental Biter is the toddler who wants to learn about cause and effect. This child is wondering, *'What will happen when I bite my friend or mommy?'* Provide this child with many other opportunities to learn about cause and effect, with toys and activities.

The Teething Biter: Infants and toddlers experience a lot of discomfort when they're teething. A natural response is to apply pressure to their gums by biting on things. It is not unusual for a teething child to bear down on a person's shoulder or breast to relieve some of their teething pain. Provide appropriate items for the child to teeth on, like frozen bagels, teething biscuits, or liquid-free teething rings.

The Social Biter: Many times an infant or toddler bites when they are trying to interact with another child. These young children have not yet developed the social skills to indicate *'Hi, I want to play with you.'* So sometimes they approach a friend with a bite to say hello. Watch young children very closely to assist them in positive interactions with their friends.

The Frustrated Biter: Young children are often confronted with situations that are frustrating, like when a friend takes their toy or when daddy is unable to respond to their needs as quickly as they would like. These toddlers lack the social and emotional skills to cope with their feelings in an acceptable way. They also lack the language skills to communicate their feelings. At these times, it is not unusual for a toddler to attempt to deal with the frustration by biting whoever is nearby. Notice when a child is struggling with frustration and be ready to intervene. It is also important to provide words for the child, to help them learn how to express their feelings, like *"That's mine!"* or *"No! Don't push me!"*

Biting is very common among groups of young children, for all types of reasons. But whatever the reason for biting, most parents find it shocking and disturbing, and they want it to stop – quickly! Understanding why the young child bites is the first step in preventing biting as well as teaching the child alternatives to biting.

The Threatened Biter: When some young children feel a sense of danger they respond by biting as a self-defense. For some children biting is a way to try to gain a sense of control over their lives, especially when they are feeling overwhelmed by their environment or events in their lives. Provide the toddler with nurturing support, to help them understand that they and their possessions are safe.

The Imitative Biter: Imitation is one of the many ways young children learn. So it is not unusual for a child to observe a friend bite, then try it out for themselves. Offer the child many examples of loving, kind behavior. Never bite a child to demonstrate how it feels to be bitten.

The Attention-Seeking Biter: Children love attention, especially from adults. When parents give lots of attention for negative behavior, such as biting, children learn that biting is a good way to get attention. Provide lots of positive attention for young children each day. It is also important to minimize the negative attention to behaviors such as biting.

The Power Biter: Toddlers have a strong need for independence and control. Very often the response children get from biting helps to satisfy this need. Provide many opportunities for the toddler to make simple choices throughout the day. This will help the toddler feel the sense of control they need. It is also important to reinforce all the toddler's attempts at positive social behavior each day.

As with almost all potentially harmful situations involving children, prevention is the key. Adults must be active observers of children to prevent biting in those times when close supervision doesn't work, the adult must intervene as quickly and as calmly as possible.

When your child bites...

- Comfort the child who was bitten.
- Cleanse the wound with mild soap and water. Provide an ice pack to reduce pain and swelling.
- Provide comfort for the wounded child by saying something like, *"That really hurt! You don't like it when your friend bites your arm!"*
- Calmly approach the child who bit. Many times these children feel overwhelmed and afraid after they bite. They need comfort, too.
- Comfort the child who bit by saying something like, *"You seem sad that your friend's arm is hurt from the bite."*
- Help the child who bit to understand the hurt their friend is feeling by offering to let them talk with their friend. Say something like, *"Would you like to see Sally now? You can tell her that you hope she feels better soon."* Older toddlers can learn a lot from being allowed to comfort their friend after a bite has occurred. The child who bit may want to see the injury. That's okay if the injured child wants to show it. But do not force either child to have this interaction, unless both are willing.
- Reinforce the rule that we don't hurt people. Help both children understand that your job is to keep everyone safe. Say, *"I know you are angry. But I can't let you bite people."*
- When the environment is calm again, remind the children what they can do to assert themselves, like say *"No! That's mine!"* or *"Back away!"* or if they are preverbal, teach them to 'growl like a tiger' to express themselves. The goal is to teach assertiveness and communication skills to both the child who bites and the child who gets bitten.

When intervening before the potential bite has occurred...

- Talk for the child by offering words like, *"I see that you wanted that toy!"*
- Demonstrate patience and understanding for the frustration the child is experiencing.
- Offer solutions like, *"We have another red truck right over here. Let's go get it."*
- Demonstrate alternate ways of interacting and say something like, *"She likes it when you rub her arm."* Try to stay focused on the positive behavior you want to see, without reminding the child of the negative behavior.

Never hit or bite a child who has bitten.

That will teach the child that violence is OK.

Young children need lots of practice to learn the fine art of interacting with their friends in a positive way. They need positive guidance and support from parents. When children gain maturity and experience, and become preschoolers (3+ years old), they will likely have developed more appropriate ways of interacting.

Dealing with biting can be challenging. Sometimes professional assistance is needed and getting help is a sign of strength. Call your healthcare provider or county health department and ask for a Child Guidance professional.

Source: National Association for the Education of Young Children



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