

Biting in the Toddler Years

Biting is very common among groups of young children, for all types of reasons, however it causes more upset feelings than any other behavior in child care programs. Because it seems so primitive, we tend to react differently to biting than we do to hitting, grabbing or other aggressive acts. Because it is upsetting and potentially dangerous, it is important for caregivers and parents to address this behavior when it occurs. Though it is normal for infants and toddlers to mouth people and toys, and for many two-year-olds to try biting, most do not continue after the age of three.

Children bite for many different reasons. Take the time to understand why a particular child bites:

- **Watch** to see when and where biting happens, who is involved, what the child experiences, and what happens before and after.
- **Ask** yourself why the child bites others. Is there a pattern to the situations, places, times or other children when biting occurs? What individual or temperamental needs might influence the child's behavior? Have there been changes in the child's health, family or home situation which might affect his/her behavior?
- **Adapt** your environment, schedule or guidance methods to teach gentle and positive ways to handle the child's feelings and needs.

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 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 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 herself. Offer the child many examples of loving, kind behavior. Never bite a child to demonstrate how it feels to be bitten.

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 him learn how to express his feelings, like "That's mine!" or "No! Don't push me!"

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. Provide the toddler with nurturing support to help him understand that he and his possessions are safe.

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.

When a child bites another child:

- **Intervene immediately** between the child who bit and the bitten child. Stay calm; don't overreact, yell or give a lengthy explanation.
- **Talk briefly to the child who bit.** Use your tone of voice and facial expression to show that biting is not acceptable. Look into the child's eyes and speak calmly but firmly. Say "I do not like it when you bite people", or simply "No biting people." You can point out how the biter's behavior affected the other child. "You hurt him and he's crying."
- **Help the child who was bitten.** Comfort the child and apply first aid. If the skin is broken, wash the wound with warm water and soap. Apply an ice pack or cool cloth to prevent swelling. Tell the parents what happened and recommend that they have the child seen by a physician if the skin is broken or there are any signs of infection (redness and swelling). Encourage the child who was bitten to tell the biter how they feel.
- **Encourage the child who bit to help the other child** by getting the ice pack, etc.
- **Alert the staff** to the incident.
- **Notify the parents of all children involved.** Let them know what happened but do not name or label the child who bit. Reassure them by telling how you handled the incident, and involve the parents in planning how to prevent and handle future biting.
- **Fill out an incident report.**

Source: Oklahoma State Department of Health, Child Guidance Program (2006). *Biting in the Toddler Years*, <http://www.ok.gov/health> .