

Chew on This: Responding to Toddlers Who Bite

Biting is a very common behavior among toddlers, which means there are a lot of concerned parents out there. You are not alone. The good news is that there is a lot that parents and caregivers can do to reduce and, ultimately, eliminate biting.

To set the stage for effectively addressing this challenge, avoid calling or thinking of your child as a “biter” and ask others not to use this term. Labeling children can actually lead to them taking on the identity assigned to them, which can intensify biting behavior rather than eliminate it.

Children bite in order to cope with a challenge or fulfill a need. For example, your child may be biting to express a strong feeling (like frustration), communicate a need for personal space (maybe another child is standing too close) or to satisfy a need for oral stimulation. Trying your best to understand the underlying cause of the biting will help you develop an effective response. This makes it more likely that you will be successful in eliminating the behavior.

Why do toddlers bite?

There are many reasons why toddlers might bite. Some are listed below. If you think one of these reasons might be why your child is biting, click the link to read specific strategies on how to respond. Toddlers might bite if they:

- [Lack the language skills](#) necessary for expressing important needs or strong feelings like anger, frustration, joy, etc. Biting is a substitute for the messages he can't yet express in words like:

I am so mad at you

You are standing too close to me

I am really excited

I want to play with you

- [Are overwhelmed by the sounds](#), light or activity level in this setting
- [Are experimenting](#) to see what will happen
- [Need more active playtime](#)
- [Are over-tired](#)
- [Are teething](#)
- [Have an need for oral stimulation](#)

What can I do to prevent biting?

As you watch your child at play, you can begin to anticipate when a bite might occur. The following questions can guide you identifying the kinds of situations often lead to biting:

- What happened right before the bite?
- Who was your child playing with?
- Who was bit? Is it always the same child, or different children each time?
- What was your child doing?
- Where was your child?
- Who was caring for your child?

If you see signs that your child might be on the verge of biting, you can:

- Distract your child with a toy or book. Suggest looking out the window or take a walk to another room or outside. The goal is to reduce the tension and shift your child's attention.
- Suggest how your child might handle the situation that is triggering the need to bite. For example: *Marcus, you can tell Ana: "You are a little too close to me. I don't like it when you touch my hair."* If you think your child might be biting due to a need for oral stimulation, offer your child something he can safely bite and chew—a cracker, some carrot sticks, or a teether.
- Suggest ways to share. Take out a kitchen timer to give children a visual reminder of how long they can each play with a particular toy. In a group caregiving setting, you will want to make sure that the classroom has more than one of the most popular toys. Sharing is one of the most common triggers for biting.

Reading books about biting can also help. As you read, ask your child how the different characters might be feeling. If you have an older toddler, you can ask him to "read" the book to you, by telling you what is happening based on the pictures. Some titles to recommend include:

- *Teeth Are Not for Biting* by Elizabeth Verdick
- *No Biting* by Karen Katz
- *No Biting, Louise* by Margie Palatini

What do I do when my toddler bites?

1. First, keep your own feelings in check. When a toddler bites, you might feel frustrated, infuriated, annoyed, embarrassed, and/or worried. All of these feelings are

normal, but responding when you are in an intense emotional state is usually not a good idea. So calm yourself before you respond—count to 10, take a deep breath, or do whatever works for you.

2. In a firm, matter-of-fact voice (but not angry or yelling), say: *No biting. Biting hurts.* Comment on how the other child is feeling: *Look, Madison is crying. She is crying because you bit her. Biting hurts.* Keep it short, simple and clear.
3. Next, shift your attention to the child who was bitten. Often when a child bites, adults pay a lot of attention to him or her. This is usually negative attention, but it is still very reinforcing and can actually cause the biting behavior to continue, rather than stop. When parents shift their focus and energy to the child who was bitten, they clearly communicate that biting does not result in more attention. Showing concern and sympathy for the child who was bitten also teaches empathy.
4. If your child is verbal and able to talk about his experiences, go back and talk with him about the different strategies he can use next time, instead of biting: *If Tyler grabs your cuddly and won't let it go, you can say: "Tyler, that is my cuddly. Give it to me." If he won't give it back, you can come get me and I will help you. Or: When you want to play, you can say: "Will you play with me?" Then your friend knows you are ready to play.*
5. Help the children move on. Ask: *What would you like to play now?* It might help to offer activities, like play-dough, drawing, or playing in sand or water, that allow them to release energy in constructive ways and can help them relax. The toddler who bit and the child who was hurt should not be made to play with one another, unless they want to.

Remember, learning a new behavior takes time. Your toddler may bite again, so continue watching playtime closely. It also helps to use the same words (No biting. Biting hurts.) as consistently as possible to emphasize the message.

Strategies for Responding to Biting Based on What's Going On For Your Child

The strategies below can help you respond based on your best guess about the reason your child is biting.

If you think biting is a substitute for not having the language skills to express himself you can:

- Put into words what you guess your child might be thinking: *Tanya, do you want to have a turn on the tricycle? You can ask Henry, Can I have a turn now?*
- Help your child express his feelings in appropriate ways. If your child is really angry, you can say: *Max, you are so mad! You are really, really angry.* Then suggest a way to deal with these feelings: Making angry lion faces and growling, ripping up newspapers, punching the couch cushions, banging a drum, jumping up and down—whatever is acceptable to you.
- Reinforce your child when he uses words to share his feelings: *You asked me for a*

turn blowing bubbles instead of grabbing them. Great job. Here you go.

- Give your child age-appropriate choices, for example, about what to wear or who to play with. Having choices gives children a sense of control and can reduce biting.
- Consider a speech-language assessment if you think your child's verbal skills might be delayed.

If your child is easily overwhelmed by lights, sound, and activity, you can:

- Keep television and radio off or on low volumes.
- Avoid big crowds and high-activity settings like the mall or the playground on a sunny Saturday morning.
- Schedule activities with a lot of sensory input (like clothes-shopping or trips to dentist or doctor) for your child's "best" times of day, when he is fed and well-rested.
- Talk with your child's other caregivers about his difficulty managing a lot of sensory input. Brainstorm ways to reduce the stimulation in his other caregiving settings.
- Give your child a firm "bear" hug when you sense she is feeling stressed and out of control and perhaps about to bite. This can help children feel "held together" which can be very soothing.
- Create a "cozy corner" in your house with pillows, books and other quiet toys like stuffed animals, or use a playtent as a safe place to take a break. Explain that this is a place your child can go if he wants to be alone or feels out of control and needs to cool down. Ensure that your child's other caregiving settings have a "cozy corner" as well.

If your child is experimenting to see what will happen when he bites, you can:

- Provide immediate, firm—but unemotional (as best you can)—feedback (No biting. Biting hurts.). Shift attention away from your child to the child who was bit.
- Help your child understand about cause-and-effect: You bit Macy and now she is crying. When you bite, it hurts your friends. Biting is never okay.

If your child needs more active play, you can:

- Set aside time each day to be active. Take a walk after breakfast. Turn music on while you are cooking dinner and have your child dance with you.
- Talk with your child's other caregivers to ensure that active play is a part of everyday. Toddlers who bite should not be punished by losing "recess" time. This may make the problem worse.
- Build activity into your child's everyday routines—for example, doing 10 jumping jacks before lunch or stretching before bed.

If your child is over-tired, you can:

- Try incrementally moving her bedtime 30 to 60 minutes earlier over a few weeks.
- Set up a schedule of naps or, if she won't nap, "quiet times" when she is in her crib or bed with a book and soft music playing.
- Avoid play-dates or other potentially stressful activities on days when she is very tired.
- Tell your child's other caregivers when she has not slept well or is tired so they can shadow her, in order to reduce the possibility of a biting incident.

If your child is teething, you can:

- Offer him a teether or cold washcloth to bite.
- Talk to your child's caregivers to make sure they understand he is teething and to identify appropriate teethers in the classroom.

If your child has a need for oral stimulation:

- Offer her crunchy (healthy) snacks at regular intervals across the day. Research has found that this intervention can actually reduce biting incidents.

When do I seek help for my toddler?

While biting is very common behavior, it usually stops by age 3 to 3 1/2. If your toddler continues to bite, or the number of bites increases instead of decreases over time, it is probably a good idea to request an assessment from a child development specialist. This professional can help you identify the reason for the biting and develop a strategy for

addressing the behavior. Remember, there is no quick fix. Over time, and with assistance, your child will stop biting and use more appropriate ways to express her needs.

What absolutely WILL NOT work to stop biting?

Shaming or harsh punishment do not reduce biting, but they do increase your child's fear and worry—which can actually increase biting incidents. Aggressive responses like these also do not teach your child the social skills he or she needs to cope with the situations that trigger biting.

Biting your child back, which some might suggest, is not a useful response. There is no research to show this behavior reduces biting. However, it does teach your child that it's okay to bite people when you are upset! Keep in mind that human bites can be dangerous, and biting constitutes child abuse. This is not an appropriate response to toddler biting.

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