



Understanding and Responding to Children who Bite

Why do young children bite?

A child might bite instinctively because they have yet to develop self-control. They may also bite to relieve pain from teething, experience the sensation of biting, satisfy a need for oral-motor stimulation, imitate other children/adults, feel in control, gain attention, act in self-defense, communicate hunger/tiredness/emotional upset.

What can families do to prevent a child from biting?

- Keep schedules, routines, and transitions the same for your child.
- At mealtimes and bedtimes, try and do things in the same manner at the same times—children thrive off of routine.
- Offer things to do, and items to play with, that allow your child to relax like Yoga and breathing exercises. Playdough, foam balls, soft music, and bubbles are also items that can reduce stress.
- Objects to bite such as teething rings or clean/cold/wet washcloths may also provide some relief.
- Use positive guidance and reminders to help your child understand what behaviors are expected. Example: “You can each have a bucket in the sandbox” or “Be sure to hang your coat up on the hook”

How should I respond when my child bites?

Infants: Infants begin learning by exploring with their hands, eyes, and mouths. If your infant experiments with biting, stay calm and use clear signals to communicate that it is not okay to bite. You can respond with a firm “No, thank you” or “no biting!”

Toddlers & Preschoolers: Toddlers often bite due to lack of language skills needed to properly express their emotions. In older children, biting may occur for self-defense, gaining attention, or something occurring within the home or school setting that is upsetting or scaring them. When you witness a biting incident respond swiftly and firmly, getting down to the children’s level and stating, “No biting. Biting hurts. We do not hurt others” and then offer a choice: either help the other child feel better or sit quietly while you console the child who was hurt. Then, have a conversation with the child who did the biting and try to find out what happened. Restate that biting is not allowed and discuss ways the child can respond to similar situations in the future.

Avoid:

- Getting angry, yelling, and shaming the child who bit.
- Labeling a child as a “biter” as negative labels can affect how the child feels about themselves.
- Forcing the child who bit and the child who was hurt to play together.
- Giving too much attention to a child who bites after the incident as this can sometimes reinforce the behavior.

What if biting becomes a habit for my child?

Observe your child to learn where/when/why they’re biting. Pay attention to signals and stay close to step in if your child seems ready to bite. Help your child learn ways to communicate their wants/needs and reinforce positive behavior by acknowledging their appropriate words and actions. Provide opportunities for your child to make choices and feel empowered. Offer foods with a variety of textures to meet your child’s sensory needs. Expecting a child to do something they’re not able to do can cause stress (which can lead to biting), so be sure your behavior expectations are age-appropriate for your child.