

# Why preschoolers bite -

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It can be shocking to hear that your preschooler has bitten another child — or to feel his teeth sinking into you. But the behavior isn't at all unusual: By the time they're in preschool, most children have bitten someone at least once, as well as been on the receiving end of an unfriendly chomp. Children bite less frequently as they get older, but at this age biting is still common in situations where children are thrown together, such as in preschool or playgroups.

Kids may bite when they just can't handle a situation — when they're overcome by fear, anger, or frustration, for instance. Or they may bite because someone bit *them*. Preschoolers often bite during a fight, when they feel cornered or fear they're about to be hurt. A major change, such as a new baby in the family or a new home, can also cause emotional upset that result in aggressive behavior. And sometimes children bite simply to gauge the effect it will have, because they're excited or over stimulated, or as a misplaced expression of love.

Still, knowing that biting is common doesn't make it any easier when your preschooler has bitten another child, or when your child's been bitten. Not only may you be upset to find out that your child's been biting, but other parents may be up in arms over the incident, and your child may no longer be welcome at preschool or playgroup.

Remember: The most important thing to keep in mind is that children don't *want* to attack others — they'd much rather play, explore, and enjoy their friends. Understanding what's behind biting is the first step in getting your child to stop. "Think about what's going on with your child," says Janis Keyser, a parenting educator and co-author of *Becoming the Parent You Want to Be*. "Your purpose is not just to stop the behavior but to help your child grow." Here's how to help.

## What to do when your preschooler bites another child

**Make sure both children are safe.** First, separate the children and make sure they're out of biting distance of each other.

**Stay calm, and don't blame or punish.** Though you may be tempted to impress upon your child the seriousness of his actions, harsh punishment can actually make preschoolers more likely to strike out. Experts suspect that such punishment causes anger and resentment that, over time, can lead a child to act out even more.

**Help both children.** Both the aggressor and the child who's been bitten need your help. First you'll need to check the damage, and maybe provide some medical attention along with plenty of warmth and caring. But don't forget the child who did the biting. He may act as if he doesn't care or like he's unaware of how much pain he inflicted — after all, no one looks more impassive than a child who's just hurt someone. But he *does* know what he did. Being warm and caring to him, as well, will help him feel comfortable enough to express his own emotions, both about the bite and about whatever was frustrating or overwhelming him in the first place.

**Encourage your preschooler to come to you when he's upset.** You may not be able to be with him when he's having his hardest times — say, at preschool — but he needs to learn that he can ask you or another adult for help. Suggest that he come to you when he's having a hard time, and then give him your full attention when he does. Think of his closeness with you when you're together as a kind of insurance policy against acts of aggression when he's not.

**Talk about what happened.** Once you've both calmed down, pick a quiet moment to ask, "How can you let someone know you're angry without hurting him?" and "How can you ask an adult for help when you don't like how other kids are treating you?" Do some simple role-playing to work through these situations ("You be Sonya from preschool, and you take my bunny"). He may pick up some lines he can use later ("No! I don't like that!"). Many preschoolers bite once, get help with it, and never do it again.

## **How to head off further biting**

**Think about when and why your child bites.** Is it at playgroup, when another child snatches away something he wants to play with? When other children are crowding him? Does he try to bite *you* when you've been nursing the new baby? Your child's teacher may also have clues about what sets him off. After a while you'll probably be able to predict when your child is likely to lash out, and be ready to intervene.

**Watch your child closely.** Warning signs, such as crying, yelling, foot-stamping, and lunging often precede biting. If he's been biting, watch your preschooler and step in before he does it again.

**Stop him before he bites again.** If signs are pointing to a new round of biting, get physically close to your child and quickly and calmly stop him from sinking his teeth into his target. You might say something like, "I can't let you hurt Ramona," or "Oh, no, I don't think I want those teeth any closer," while you gently but firmly hold his forehead a few inches from your shoulder or cup your hand gently over his mouth.

**Stay warm and loving toward him.** This may be hard when you're trying to prevent a new round of biting — you may be emotional yourself or feel enormous pressure to yell or stop him by force. But if you can remember how much you love him while you're restraining him, he may feel safe enough to show you how sad or mad he feels. "It really helps to get yourself on your child's side," says Keyser, "and remember that he's doing the best he can at any given moment." He may be able to tell you about his feelings in words or he may not, but it doesn't really matter. You may have to intervene this way a number of times before he's able to stop *himself* from biting.

**Go with him on play dates.** You may need to go along with your child on play dates until the problem resolves itself, or at least warn play date parents about the biting problem ahead of time and give them a few tips on what tends to work best with your child. If you think they won't be able to handle the situation in a calm and loving way, put off the play date until later.

**Never bite your child back.** Some parents think this drives home the point that biting is painful. But what it really does is show your child the wrong way to deal with aggression — that is, by becoming aggressive in return. Even "love bites" from parents can contribute to a child's biting — so never bite your child, even in fun.

**Demystify biting.** Talk about biting — but don't preach — or play a simple game. Ask your child to tell you some foods he likes to bite. Or name everyday objects (a cupcake, a table, a dog, a banana) and ask him to say whether they're okay to bite. You can get progressively sillier (a car, the vacuum cleaner, Daddy's shoes) and both of you can laugh about it.

**Talk to your child's teacher.** First, try to find out more about the environment you're leaving your preschooler in. Does the teacher make an effort to intervene in aggressive behavior, whether it's biting, punching, or constant teasing? You want to make sure you're not leaving your child in the middle of a free-for-all where children must fend for themselves. If you're satisfied that the teacher has the situation under control, ask how she deals with biting — veteran teachers often have a bag of

inventive tricks for dealing with common behavior problems that are worth trying out at home, too. This is also a chance to find out whether her responses to biting incidents are doing more harm than good.

**Give him a biting substitute.** Some preschools keep bowls of apples around and give an apple to a child who's biting. It's a good, satisfying alternative if he just has to sink his teeth into something!