

# Biting

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## Topic Overview

### Is it normal for a child to bite?

Most children younger than age 3 bite someone else at least once. Most children stop biting on their own. Biting that happens past age 3 or occurs frequently at any age may need treatment. Biting is not always intentional, and it rarely causes serious injury to another person or poses any health risks.

### Why do children bite?

Children bite for different reasons, depending on their age.

- **Between 5 and 7 months of age** , children usually bite other people when they feel discomfort around their mouths or when they are in pain caused by teething. Most often they bite their caregivers. Sometimes a young baby bites his or her mother during breast-feeding. Children of this age learn not to bite as they see and hear the reaction of the person they have bitten.
- **Between 8 and 14 months of age** , children usually bite other people when they are excited. Most often they bite a caregiver or another child close to them. A firm "no" usually stops these children from biting again.
- **Between 15 and 36 months of age** , children may bite other people when they are frustrated or want power or control over another person. Usually they bite other children. Less frequently they bite their caregivers. Children of this age usually stop biting as they learn that biting is not acceptable behaviour.
- **After age 3** , children usually bite when they feel powerless or scared, such as when they are losing a fight or think that they are going to be hurt by another person. Children older than 3 who frequently bite other people may need to be seen by a doctor. This type of biting may be a sign that a child has problems with expressing feelings or self-control.

## **When is my child most likely to bite another child?**

Biting occurs in a variety of situations, most often when many children are together. In the United States, human bites are a common cause of injury at daycare centres.<sup>1</sup> Most biting can be prevented with proper supervision that includes helping children express their feelings appropriately.

A child of any age who frequently bites other children may need special arrangements for daycare. Parents may be asked to transfer their child out of a centre when biting becomes a continual problem. The child may need to attend a child care centre with staff who are skilled in dealing with children who bite.

## **Can biting be a sign of a more serious problem?**

Biting in young children usually does not lead to behaviour problems at a later age. But children who persistently bite and show other aggressive behaviours, especially if they are older than age 3, may have other health or emotional issues. These children should be seen by a doctor.

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## **Home Treatment**

### **How to help prevent biting**

Positive reinforcement helps to prevent your child from biting. Praise your child when he or she shows behaviours you want to encourage, such as sharing, being kind, showing empathy, or being patient.

When you see your child behaving well, reward him or her for that behaviour. A reward does not need to be candy, toys, or other treats. A reward can be as simple as telling the child how well he or she is doing and that you appreciate co-operation or a good-natured response to a problem or frustration. For example, say "Great job! You used your words when you were angry." An enthusiastic pat on the back or a hug when the child is behaving well helps the child associate non-aggressive behaviour with good things. The child will gradually realize that it feels better to get positive attention for being good than it does to get negative attention for biting or other aggressive behaviour.

In addition, parents should model the behaviour they would like to see in their child. Avoid angry outbursts and other forms of aggression. Set a good example by showing your child how to deal calmly with everyday frustrations.

### **How to help a child who has been bitten**

When one child bites another, first take care of the child who was bitten and give emotional support:

- Move the child away from the situation.
- Comfort the child within sight of the child who bit him or her.
- Help the child express his or her feelings about being bitten, such as by saying, "It's okay to cry. Being bitten hurts."
- Do **not** say, "Johnny was bad to bite you."

Examine the area where the child was bitten. Most bites from children are not harmful and leave little, if any, evidence. A tooth mark on the skin or slight bruising may appear, which usually does not require medical attention. Tender loving care and an ice pack on the bite are most often all that is needed.

In rare cases, a bite from a child will pierce the skin and bleed. Usually the injury is still minor and can be treated at home. But these types of bites should be closely watched because they are more prone to infection.

The immunization and health history of each child should be reviewed to make sure the children are not at risk for illness. Immunizations must be up-to-date for tetanus and hepatitis B vaccine for both children.

Contact a doctor if a bite pierces the skin and:

- Appears severe.
- Signs of infection develop.
- The child who was bitten has immune system problems, which increase the risk for complications from infection.

For more information on treating bites, see the topic Animal and Human Bites.

### **How to respond to a child who bites**

When your child bites, let him or her know that biting is not acceptable. React to the biting incident in a dramatic way (but without violence or aggression). If you were the one bitten, overreact to the pain. If your child bit someone else, react with a firm voice and stern facial expression. Say, "No! We do not bite." Many children are as shocked and upset as the person who has been bitten because they may not be aware that biting hurts.

Suggest other ways for your child to express feelings. For example, say, "Use your words to tell Susan you are angry at her for taking your truck."

### **When a child bites, DO NOT:**

- **Bite the child back to show how it feels to be bitten.**
- **Wash out the child's mouth with soap.**
- **Pinch, slap, or use other physical punishment.**

Children over the age of 3 who continue to bite may benefit from time-out. Time-out removes the child from the situation, allows him or her time to calm down, and teaches the child that biting is not acceptable behaviour. Time-out works best for children who understand why it is being used.

### **Biting that occurs in a child care centre**

When one child bites another in a child care centre, the director may ask to meet with the parents of both children. If biting keeps happening, measures that can be tried include:

- Shortening your child's day at the centre.
- Watching your child closely to identify when he or she is most likely to bite. Some activities may frustrate your child. Replacing frustrating activities with less challenging activities may be all that is needed to stop a child from biting.
- Staying on a consistent routine.

Contact a doctor if:

- You have not been able to stop your child's biting using the above techniques.
- You have difficulty handling your reaction to your child's biting.
- Your child's biting is disrupting his or her life.
- You need suggestions for treating biting.

## Credits for Biting

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