

Why Children Bite

Biting is quite common among young children. It happens for different reasons with different children and under different circumstances. The first step in learning to control it is to look at why it may be happening.

WHY CHILDREN BITE

EXPLORATION - Infants and toddlers learn by touching, smelling, hearing, and tasting. If you give an infant a toy, one of the first places it goes to is the mouth. Tasting or "mouthing" things is something that all children do. Children this age do not always understand the difference between gnawing on a toy and biting someone.

TEETHING - Children begin teething around the ages of 4 to 7 months. Swelling gums can be tender and can cause a great deal of discomfort. Infants sometimes find relief from this discomfort by chewing on something. Sometimes the object they chomp on is a real person! Children this age do not truly understand the difference between chewing on a person or a toy.

CAUSE AND EFFECT - Around the age of 12 months, infants become interested in finding out what happens when they do something. When they bang a spoon on the table, they discover that it makes a loud sound. When they drop a toy from their crib, they discover that it falls. They may also discover that when they bite someone, they get a loud scream of protest!

ATTENTION - Older toddlers may sometimes bite to get attention. When children are in situations where they are not receiving enough positive attention and daily interaction, they often find a way to make others sit up and take notice. Being ignored is not fun. Biting is a quick way to become the center of attention - even if it is negative attention.

IMITATION - Older toddlers love to imitate others. Watching others and trying to do what they do is a great way to learn things. Sometimes children see others bite and decide to try it out themselves. When an adult bites a child back in punishment, it generally does not stop the biting but teaches the child that biting is okay.

INDEPENDENCE - Toddlers are trying so hard to be independent. "Mine" and "Me do it" are favorite words. Learning to do things independently, making choices, and needing control over a situation are part of growing up. Biting is a powerful way to control others. If you want a toy or want a playmate to leave you alone or move out of your way, it is a quick way to get what you want.

FRUSTRATION - Young children experience a lot of frustration. Growing up is a real struggle. Drinking from a cup is great; yet nursing or sucking from a bottle is also wonderful. Sometimes it would be nice to remain a baby. Toddlers don't have good control over their bodies yet. A loving pat sometimes turns into a push. Toddlers cannot talk well. They have trouble asking for things or requesting help. They haven't learned yet how to play with others. At times, when they can't find words to express their feelings, they resort to hitting, pushing, or biting.

STRESS - A child's world can be stressful, too. A lack of daily routine, interesting things to do, or adult interaction are stressful situations for children. Children also experience stressful events like death, divorce, or a move to a new home. Biting is one way to express feelings and relieve tension.

WHAT CAREGIVERS CAN DO

- **USE THE WHO, WHAT, WHEN, WHERE, AND HOW METHOD TO PINPOINT THE PROBLEM.** When did the biting occur? Who was involved? Where did it happen? What happened before or after? How was the situation handled?
- **TRY PREVENTION.** If you determine that the biting occurs as the result of exploration or teething, you may want to provide the child with a cloth or teething ring to gnaw on.

If a child seems to bite when tired or hungry, you may want to look at your daily routine to be sure that he is getting enough sleep and nourishment.

If the biting occurs when two children are fighting over a toy telephone, you may want to purchase an extra toy telephone. It does not work to make very young children share. Toddlers don't have the skills to negotiate or understand another child's perspective.

If attention seems to be the main reason for biting, try to spend time with the child when she is doing more positive things. Snuggling up and reading a book together or rolling a ball back and forth is so much more fun than receiving a scolding.

If the child is experiencing a stressful family or caregiving situation, you will want to make everyday life as supportive and normal as possible. Predictable meals and bedtimes and extra time with a loving adult can help. Often, experiences like rolling, squishing, and pounding play dough or relaxing and splashing in the bathtub are great ways to relieve tension. In painful situations like divorce, it takes time and patience for healing to occur.

- **TEACH NEW BEHAVIORS.** When a child bites, show the biter with your voice and facial expression that biting is unacceptable. Speak firmly and look directly into the child's eyes. For example you might say, "No! Sara, it's not okay to bite. It hurts Jon when you bite him. He's crying. I won't let you bite Jon or another child." If the child is able to talk, you might also say, "You can tell Jon with your words that you need him to move instead of biting him. Say 'Move, Jon!'"

You may also want the child to help wash, bandage, and comfort the victim. Making her a part of the comforting process is a good way to teach nurturing behavior.

Whenever the child is out of control, you will need to restrain or isolate her until she calms down. Insist on a "time out" or "cooling off period." Wait a few minutes until things are under control, and then talk to the child about her behavior.

A FINAL NOTE

Biting can be an uncomfortable issue for parents. Parents of a child who is bitten are often outraged and angry. Parents of the biter may feel embarrassed and frustrated. Sharing information about the causes of biting and your plans for controlling the situation can help parents to put things into perspective.

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