



Does this Sound Familiar?

# Responding to Your Child's Bite

**M**arc is preparing dinner and his two children—Jack (3 years) and Jalen (1½ years)—are playing with cars on the kitchen floor. Suddenly, Marc hears a bloodcurdling scream coming from Jack that quickly turns into sobs. Between sobs, Jack shows his dad his arm and slowly says, “He bit me.” Jalen has bitten Jack. Marc is frustrated. He doesn’t know what to do. Jalen bites often. He bites his brother, other children on the playground, and children in his childcare class. Marc is not sure how to respond. He wonders if he should use “time out” as a consequence, but thinks that Jalen is just too young to understand the relationship between biting and a “time out.”

## The Focus

Many toddlers and young children bite. Developmentally, most toddlers don't have enough words to express how they are feeling. They primarily rely on sounds and actions to communicate what they are thinking and feeling. Biting is one of the ways toddlers express their needs, desires, or feelings. While biting might be very frustrating, your child is not biting purposefully annoy you or hurt anyone. Your child might be biting to say, "I'm scared," "People are crowding me," or "I'm frustrated." Naturally, parents and caregivers worry that biting might seriously injure another child. And they worry about the negative impact for the biter as well, such as being avoided by other children. The good news is that there are many ways to reduce and to stop a child's biting.

## Why Do Children Bite?

Young children bite for many different reasons. Understanding why your toddler might be biting is the first step in reducing or stopping the behavior. The following are some of the reasons young children bite.

- **Communicating frustration**—Many young children bite out of frustration. They often do not know other ways to express their strong feelings. Biting might communicate messages such as, "I don't like that" or "I want that toy" or "You are in my space."
- **Challenges in playing with others**—Some young children can become overwhelmed when playing near or with others. They might not know how to share, take turns, or communicate their wishes or interests.
- **Cause and effect**—Toddlers might bite to see the effect it has on others. They learn quickly that it gets a BIG reaction and has a major impact from both the children they bite and the adults who witness it.

- **Exploration and learning**—One of the most important ways toddlers learn about their world is through their senses. Biting might be a way to find out what an object, or person, feels like. In other words, their biting might be trying to communicate, "You seem interesting. I wonder what you feel and taste like?"
- **Oral stimulation**—Some children bite because they enjoy and seek out the physical sensation of biting or chewing.
- **Teething**—Many children experience pain when they are teething. Biting or chewing on something can help ease the pain of teething.
- **Monkey see, monkey do**—Toddlers love to imitate or copy the behaviors of others. They learn so much by practicing behaviors they observe. For example, if Jalen sees Sara bite and sees that Sara receives quite a bit of attention for biting (even if it is negative attention), Jalen might want to try out that biting behavior to see how the various adults in his life react.
- **Coping with uncomfortable feelings**—When children are hungry, sleepy, bored, or anxious, they are less able to cope with life's ups and downs (for example, a toy being taken, not getting that second cookie after lunch) and might resort to biting instead of finding other ways to express their needs or feelings.

## Normal but Unacceptable

While biting is a typical behavior for young children, that doesn't mean it is acceptable. Biting can cause discomfort, angry feelings, and on occasion serious injury. Other children may begin to make negative comments about (e.g., "he's mean") or avoid playing with children who frequently bite. Social reactions such as these can be very harmful to a child's relationships with other children and his feelings about himself.

## What Can You Do?

Children can be taught more appropriate ways to express their needs and feelings.

## Observe

Observe your child to attempt to understand more about why he/she bites. Identify any patterns, such as what happens before your child bites. Notice when, where, and who your child bites. Does he/she bite when crowded in a small space with other children, or when he/she is hungry or sleepy? Does he/she bite when there are a number of children present or when the noise level is high?



## Try to prevent biting

Once you understand why and when your child is likely to bite, you can try to change situations in order to prevent it. The following are just a few ways you can use your observations to this end:

- **If your child seems to bite when frustrated:** You can say, "You are so frustrated. You want that toy." Teach your child simple words such as "mine" or "no." Teach some basic sign language or gestures for things like "help" or "stop."

- **If your child seems to bite because he/she is overwhelmed by playing near or with others:** Join your child in play by sitting on the floor and coaching him/her in play. Your child might need help to understand other children's ideas. He/she might also need guidance to learn and practice how to join play, take turns, share, communicate with other children, and get help if he/she needs it. For example, if another child tries to take your child's doll, you might say, "Molly thinks your doll looks fun. She wants to play too. Can we show Molly where the other dolls are?"

- **If you think your child is biting to see what happens when he/she bites:** Clearly and calmly let your child know that biting hurts. Keep your reaction neutral, non-emotional, short, and as uninteresting as possible to avoid teaching that biting has a big effect on the adult. An adult's big reaction can be very rewarding and reinforcing. Encourage your child to experiment with cause and effect in other ways. For example, you might want to show him/her how to wave "bye bye" so that others will wave back, or let your child tickle you and then give him/her a big laughing reaction.

- **If you think your child might be biting for oral stimulation:** Offer crunchy healthy foods such as crackers, rice cakes, or pretzels at snack intervals throughout the day. Or, provide appropriate and interesting items for your child to chew on (e.g., teething toys).

- **If your child is biting because he/she is teething:** Give him/her a teething ring or cloth to chew on. Chilled teethingers can also soothe sore gums.

- **If your child tends to bite when he/she is tired:** Provide increased opportunities for your child to rest. Gradually move naps or bedtime up in 10- to 15-minute intervals to earlier times. Ask your child's other caregivers to watch and stay close when he/she seems tired. Minimize stressful or stimulating activities when your child is tired.

- **If you believe your child might be biting when he/she is hungry:** Try to offer more frequent healthy snacks. Show your child what he/she can bite—food.

- **If you believe your child might bite when he/she is bored:** Provide novel, interesting activities and toys to explore and play with. Change the environment as needed (when you see your child becoming bored or unfocused) by rotating toys or going outdoors or into different play spaces.

- **If you believe your child might bite when he/she is anxious:** Talk about any changes he/she might be experiencing. Help your child put words or signs to his/her feelings. Attempt to keep confusion and uncertainty at a minimum by talking about transitions, schedules, plans, etc.

## What Can You Do in the Moment When Your Child Bites?

- 1 Quickly yet calmly remove your child from the person he has bitten. Calmly (e.g., without yelling or scolding), clearly, and firmly say, "Stop. No biting. Biting hurts." Show and explain the effect of the bite on the other child. For example, you might say, "Jack is crying and sad because the bite hurts him."
- 2 Focus most of your attention on the child who was bitten. Understandably, adults often react strongly to the child who bit as they try to correct the biting behavior. However, even negative attention can encourage the biting. Helping to soothe the child who was bitten teaches empathy and helps the child who bit to understand the power of his actions. It might be helpful to say to the child who was bitten, "I'm so sorry this happened. I know biting really hurts," as a way to model apologies and empathy. Avoid trying to get your child to apologize. While it is important for your child to develop empathy, trying to get your child to apologize typically results in paying more attention to the biter and not the child who was bit.
- 3 Acknowledge your child's feelings. You might say something like, "You are frustrated. Let's find another way. Touch gently or ask for the toy. You can say, 'Can I have that?'"
- 4 When your child is calm (not in the heat of the moment), teach him/her other ways to express his/her needs and desires. For example, you might say to your child, "Biting hurts. Next time, if Sienna is grabbing your toy you can say stop or ask a grownup for help." It might be helpful to role play scenarios where your child can practice saying "stop" or "help."





## What to Do When Biting Continues

- **Be patient.** It can take time to learn a new way to cope with difficult feelings. Continue to observe and try to understand as best you can the purpose of the biting, the need it is meeting. Stay calm when it happens and focus on teaching your child alternative ways to get needs met. Continue to help put words to your child's experience: "You don't like it when Jalen bites. You can say 'stop.'"
- **Shadow or stay within arm's distance of your child during playtime** with other children and/or at times when you believe your child might be more likely to bite. Staying close gives your child a sense of security and makes it easier to intervene before your child bites.
- **Talk to others who care for your child.** Share with your child's daycare provider or other caregivers the strategies you use when your child bites. Share the observations you have made about when your child seems to be more prone to biting. Ask your childcare provider for help and suggestions for preventing and responding to biting. Try to have all caregivers approach the biting in the same way.
- **Provide your child with education about teeth and what teeth are for.** Teeth are for chewing foods, not people. Offer your child appropriate things to chew.

- **Read books about biting.** As you read, ask your child how the different characters might be feeling. If you have an older toddler, you can ask him/her to "read" the book to you by telling you what is happening based on the pictures. Some recommended titles include
  - *Teeth Are Not for Biting* by Elizabeth Verdick
  - *No Biting* by Karen Katz
  - *No Biting*, Louise by Margie Palatini

## What Not to Do

- **Don't bite back.** Biting a child back to show what it feels like creates confusion and fear. Young children often cannot make the connection between why you bit them and their own biting. And it teaches that biting is an acceptable problem-solving method. Biting hurts and can be considered a form of child abuse.
- **Don't use harsh punishment.** Yelling, scolding, lecturing, or using any form of physical punishment has not been demonstrated to reduce biting. Harsh reactions such as these might increase your child's level of anxiety or fear and might cause more biting. They also do not teach children a new skill to use instead of biting.

## When to Seek Professional Help

If your child's biting does not decrease over time, you might want to consider seeking guidance from your pediatrician or the nurse in your doctor's office or medical clinic. If your child is enrolled in an early childhood or Head Start program, ask if there is someone there who might be able to address the biting or refer you to another professional. A child therapist or a child development professional can help you to sort out potential reasons for your child's biting and to devise a plan to address it.

*Portions adapted with permission from "ZERO TO THREE. (n.d.). Chew on This: Responding to Toddlers Who Bite." Retrieved June 5, 2008, from [http://www.zerotothree.org/site/PageServer?pagename=ter\\_key\\_social\\_biting&JSevSessionIdr009=4rzxepxog4.app2a](http://www.zerotothree.org/site/PageServer?pagename=ter_key_social_biting&JSevSessionIdr009=4rzxepxog4.app2a)*



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