

Questions & Answers about biting

Many young children go through a biting phase that is troubling to parents. Time usually solves the problem, although there are things parents can do to help keep children from biting.

1. Why does my child bite?

There is no one answer to this question. There are many different reasons why a child might bite. For example:

Exploration: Young children learn through their senses, such as seeing, touching, and hearing. Biting is another way to explore the world.

Teething: Biting can help a young child soothe gums that are sore because of teething.

Cause and effect: Older infants and toddlers are beginning to understand cause-and-effect relationships. They may be curious to see what happens when they bite. However, a child may not realize that biting can hurt others.

Attention: Biting is a quick way for a child to receive attention.

Imitation: Children may bite because they see other children biting.

Independence: Young children are learning to act independently, but they don't have the social skills of an older child or adult.

Biting can be a quick way to get a toy the child wants, or to make another child leave.

Frustration: Growing up can be frustrating to young children. Young children don't have good control over their bodies, and they don't always know how to express their feelings in words. As a result, a child might bite (or hit, push, etc.) to express frustration.

Stress: Events such as divorce, a pet's death, or starting a new preschool can be stressful for children. Biting can be a way to express feelings and relieve tension.

Self-defense: Some children bite because another child has bitten or been cruel to them.

Your child's pediatrician or pediatric dentist will also be able

to answer any questions you might have about biting.

2. Is biting common in children?

Many children between the ages of 14 months and 3 years go through a biting phase that usually disappears when they can express their needs and feelings through words. Parents who stay calm, respond thoughtfully, and encourage children to express themselves with words instead of biting can help guide children through this phase.

3. What can I do to stop my child from biting?

Learning when and why children bite can help solve the problem. For instance, does the biting usually occur when a child is tired or hungry? Does the child always bite the same person? Does the biting usually occur at daycare when children want the same toy?

If biting occurs when two young children want the same toy, buying a second toy may help until children are old enough to learn to share. Children who are biting one another can be redirected to separate activities until this phase passes.

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If biting occurs with a major change in a child's life, such as starting a new preschool, he or she may need extra love and attention during this time.

Watch for signs of rising frustration in your child and take action to prevent biting from happening. Young children can be directed to other activities to prevent biting.

4. Will biting behavior just go away if I ignore it?

Children will move through this phase as they learn better social skills, but parents can help by talking to children and teaching them to express their feelings using words. Watching children to keep them from biting will also help them work through the biting phase.

5. How can my childcare provider and I help solve my child's biting problem?

Parents and childcare providers can work together as teams to solve your child's biting. Team members can work together to find reasons for your child's biting and respond thoughtfully. Communicating and comparing observations at home and at the childcare center can help you solve this problem together.

6. Are there ways I can prevent my child from biting?

Parents can teach children to express themselves in words. The more they can put their feelings into words ("*I'm mad. I want the truck.*" "*I'm sad. I can't find my bear.*"), the less likely children will be to bite.

Parents can help children understand that people experience lots of feelings, and there are many ways to express those feelings. Use words to share your feelings—frustration, joy, sadness, fear, envy, happiness, pride—to help your children model this behavior. Talk to your children about their feelings and help them put feelings into words.

Help children see that there are many ways to express feelings both in words and in other ways. For instance, if they feel sad or lonely, children can hug a stuffed animal or cuddle with a pet. If children feel frustrated, they can express their emotions by drawing pictures or throwing Frisbees in the park. Children can also learn that music expresses a variety of feelings.

Another way to stop biting and other negative behaviors is to praise children for beginning to learn to share and play with other children. When children show signs of learning social skills such as saying "*Thank you,*" patience and sharing with other children, or indicating that they are aware of other people's needs, be sure to tell them you are proud of them.

7. My child's biting of other children has become worse; so far nothing seems to work. What do I do?

A child with a serious biting problem may need to be removed from social situations involving other children for a while. Your child may also need to be closely watched by an adult who can

step in to prevent biting when necessary, and who can help guide your child to learn better ways to deal with problems. If your child continues biting beyond the age of three, professional help may be needed.

8. My grandmother tells me I should just bite my child if he bites me. Should I do this?

Never hit or bite a child. This communicates that biting is an acceptable way to work out problems, even if it hurts others.

When your child bites, stay calm and respond quickly. Give the child who was bitten your attention first, tend to the wound, and reassure him or her. Then turn your attention to your child, who did the biting. Calmly and firmly tell your child that he or she is not allowed to bite and that biting hurts. "*Emma is crying because her hand hurts where you bit her.*"

As both children are likely be upset by the event, give each a comforting hug and then redirect them to a quiet activity so that both have time to calm down. Wait a few minutes and then talk with your child about what caused him to bite and how he might express his feelings differently in the future. A hug will reassure a young child that you still love him, while your words tell him that biting is not good.

Sources:

National Association for the Education of Young Children. (1996). *Biters: Why they do it and what to do about it.* [On-line]. Available: <http://npin.org/library/>

Nelsen, J., Erwin, C., & Duffy, R. (1998). *Positive discipline: The first three years.* Rocklin, CA: Prima Publishing.