



Coping with Biting

by Natalie Deloge, Preschool Director

Why does my child bite?

Biting in young children is very common. Babies tend to bite when they are teething; this is normal. Offer teething rings, cold wash cloths or other appropriate items to bite. An infant doesn't know the difference between gnawing on a toy or a person. An excited one year old might bend down and bite you, but this is just their way of handling overwhelming feelings. They may also be experimenting with "cause and effect," as they seek to learn what happens when they do something, like dropping a toy from their crib. Just firmly say 'NO!' and shake your head. A toddler (18 mo-30 mo) who truly "bites," well that's another story...



Biting is a form of defense or a way of expressing powerful feelings. A toddler who bites might be feeling frustrated, stressed, powerless, afraid, angry, or a loss of control. Although it is common for a toddler to bite it is very worrisome and embarrassing for the parent. You should NEVER bite or harm a child in any way in response to his action or in order to teach a lesson, but there are several other things a parent can do.

How can I prevent biting?

Compliment the child when appropriate behavior is observed. This will give the child the recognition or attention they might be seeking. Watch what you teach. Parents who yell or throw things display aggressive behavior which in turn teaches children to be aggressive. Supervise closely and intervene BEFORE the biting occurs.

How should I intervene when biting occurs?

Identify the incident and make notes of the time(s) when biting occurs. Notice who was involved, where it happened, and what happened before and after. Was it in a large group, with a certain playmate, etc.? If there is a pattern, you can take steps to avoid the biting. *Example: If biting occurred over a toy, purchase an extra toy. The child may be too young to understand the concept of sharing. If the biting occurred when they are tired or hungry, rethink your daily routine and provide nutritious snacks and plenty of rest time. If the biting occurred when a child was playing in a large group of children, perhaps changing the group size to just a few friends will make a difference; too many playmates might be overwhelming for the child.*

What steps can I take to discourage biting?

Use brief time outs. Say: "NO BITING BECAUSE BITING HURTS. TIME OUT!" Place the child in a quiet area and show positive attention to the child who was bitten. Read books on biting and role play with your child. This helps to show the child how to respond to his emotions in socially acceptable ways. *Great books on biting: Teeth are not for Biting, Elizabeth Verdick (a board book); No Biting!, Karen Katz (a lift the flap book); No Biting Louise, Margie Palatini.*

What are some ways to teach new behavior?

Let your facial expressions and your voice teach that biting is unacceptable. Speak firmly and look into the child's eyes. Have the child (the biter) help wash and bandage the victim if necessary. This makes the child part of the comforting process and teaches an empathetic and nurturing behavior. Biting usually stops when language skills increase as children will start using words to communicate. Just remember to use consistency and firmness. Biting should never be ignored. Toddlers are developmentally too young to have good social skills or self control skills. They need our help as parents and caregivers to show them how to play safely with peers.

What's your question?

To suggest a topic for the next issue or to submit an article for publication, please contact the Healthy Start Coalition of Flagler & Volusia at:
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