

# Parenting News

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## Biting-A painful message

**B**iting is a common problem in children 12 to 36 months old. Not all toddlers bite as part of their social development, but the few that do can create havoc in a family or group of children. Understanding why children bite and taking precautions can help reduce biting incidents and prevent them from happening.

### Why children bite

Experts disagree about the exact cause of biting. Some teething infants and toddlers bite to apply pressure to their gums, others while trying to give kisses and show affection. And many toddlers bite during or after periods of conflict. It is clearly an effective, though primitive, form of communication. Biting says, with power and authority, that the biter is unhappy and needs attention from someone who can help.

Toddlers face conflicts every day while learning social skills, language, and self-control. During conflicts, intense negative feelings like frustration, anger, fear, and confusion build up.

Young children who don't know how to control or express their negative feelings choose biting to stop uncomfortable situations.

Toddlers do not completely understand that their actions hurt others. Until children reach 24 months, they most likely will not be able to make the connection between their mouths and another person's pain. Biting normally stops by age 3 when children have had practice expressing their needs and frustrations in other ways.

### Responding to biting

When a child bites someone, immediately make it clear that the behavior is not acceptable. Whether the cause is sore gums or a fight over a toy, the first response is to say loudly and strongly, "No, no biting." Frequently when an adult makes an explosive verbal response to a first bite, the child never bites again. Try to save this strong "No" for serious offences. A child who hears "No" all day long will probably not understand the difference between behaviors that are dangerous and those that are merely irritating.

In a conflict, acknowledge the biter's emotions without condoning the actions. Feelings are always acceptable, some behaviors are not. Emphasize the consequences: "I know you're frustrated, but I can't let you bite your brother. It hurts."

Attend to the biting victim, offering comfort and first aid as necessary. Cover the bite with a cold wet washcloth, and soothe the child's tears. The biter then witnesses the extent of the pain. This comforting action can help toddlers understand consequences. It also conveys the message that hurting others is not a way for biters to get attention for themselves. When biters are older than 2 years, let them help comfort the wounded child.

Once a child has bitten someone, watch for situations that might trigger more biting behavior. Prevention is always better than a cure. Identify times when children feel stress, frustration, fatigue, or the need for attention-and respond before biting occurs.

Never bite children to show “*how it feels*,” and never encourage children to bite back. Instead, model acceptable responses to frustration and anger.

## Preventing biting

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Because some children bite when they are in pain, examine your child’s physical state.

- Does Michael bite when he’s uncomfortable, in pain, or sick?
- Does he bite only when he is cutting new teeth?
- Review the child’s schedule and routine. Does Lauren bite only when she is hungry or sleepy?

Check the environment. Toddlers learn through exploration and experimentation. Their bodies need to exercise as they grow. Ideally, the home allows for natural curiosity and movement. When Greg feels unchallenged and bored, or when Sophie is frustrated, their response might be to bite.

Pay attention to children’s emotions. New places and people, especially new siblings, can cause anxieties that carry over into everyday activities. Fights, arguments, and the disappearance of loved ones can have a negative impact. Respond to a child’s emotional state. Say, for example, “*You look angry, Michael. Tell Katie to stop pulling. You don’t like that.*” Be specific. Avoid abstract statements such as, “*Stop being mean, Katie.*” Instead, say, “*Michael is angry, Katie, because you’re taking his truck.*” Toddlers usually need for adults to describe what is happening and to model the words to use.

When necessary, step in physically. Toddlers learn more from your actions than from your words. Gently but firmly place a hand on the child losing control or move the children away from each other. Explain why this is necessary. “*I can’t let you hurt your brother. You need to calm your body and be safe.*”

There are no quick cures or universally successful responses to biting. It’s a behavior parents and teachers spend hours discussing and fretting over. Most of the time biting means only that a

child has found an efficient way to get a powerful response to a behavior. By responding promptly and consistently and helping children learn to express their feelings in words, parents can help toddlers grow past this unacceptable behavior.

*Adapted from an article by Veronica Garcia in Texas Child Care, Summer 1999.*