

How to Help Your Child Stop Biting

Brooke Brogde, Alyson Jiron & Jill Giacomini; adapted by The GRIT Program

It is common for a child to bite others at some point during their early years. When children do not have skills or words to express their feelings, they might engage in behavior, such as biting, to let you know how they feel. Children might bite for different reasons:

- **Frustration** – they might bite because they want their toy back.
- **Lack of play skills** – they might bite because they feel overwhelmed by the closeness of other children or the expectation to share toys.
- **Attention** – they might bite because it gets a big reaction from adults.
- **Teething** – they might bite to relieve pain from new teeth coming in.
- **Overwhelming emotions** – they might bite because they don't know how to express emotions when hungry, tired, scared or anxious.



The important thing to remember when biting occurs is to stay calm with your actions and words; first try to figure out **why** the biting happened. For example, if your child bites when your attention is focused on another person in the room, you might think your child bit re-connect. Once you understand the reasons your child bites, you can teach them new ways to express themselves during situations when they are likely to bite. It takes time, patience and repeated practice, but once they have mastered appropriate skills to express their feelings, biting and other challenging behaviors will decrease.

Suggestions for Families

If your child is biting out of frustration, 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 is biting because they lack play skills, join in play by sitting on the floor and coaching your child. They might need guidance to learn and practice how to join play, take turns, share, communicate with other children, and get help. For example, if another child tries to take their doll, you might say, "Molly thinks your doll looks fun. She wants to play too. Let's show Molly where the other dolls are."

If your child is biting to connect with you, keep your response non-emotional, short, and uninteresting, to avoid teaching that biting gets adult attention. An adult's big reaction can be reinforcing for the child. Instead, show your child appropriate ways to connect, such as tapping you on the shoulder, and then respond when that behavior occurs.

If your child is biting because they're teething, offer crunchy healthy foods like crackers or pretzels throughout the day. Give a teething ring or cloth to chew on. Chilled teethers can also soothe sore gums.

If your child is biting when they feel overwhelmed by strong feelings, you can teach them about emotions and ways to deal with them to reduce or get rid of the biting behavior. You can use books about feelings as teaching tools. You can also help your child identify and label their own or others' emotions.

Suggestions for Educators

When a child bites at a centre, educators immediately help the child who has been hurt. By first attending to the hurt child, educators are not giving attention to the biting. This lets the child who bit know that if they want someone's attention, biting does not work. Educators also include the child who bit in helping the hurt child as much as possible. This may include having them get an ice pack, carry a bandage, offer a hug, etc. By including the child, they see the result of their actions, and learn how to solve problems and help friends. After the situation has calmed down, educators might talk about what happened and offer ideas on what the child can do the next time they feel like biting. They might also put books in the library about biting to read.

The Bottom Line

Biting is a common behavior for very young children, but one that must be addressed immediately. Children might bite when they feel overwhelmed by an emotion and don't have the words or skills to tell someone or ask for help. Parents can watch and learn when their child is likely to bite (during play dates with friends, when left alone with a sibling, when teething, etc.) and then teach their child a new way to express their wants and needs.