

Biting Behavior in Toddlers

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Biting is a common misbehavior in preverbal children, and many children go through a biting phase. Each year, our toddler class has at least one child that bites in the group. It is a difficult issue for the teacher, and an emotional one for parents on both sides of the incident.

Like all toddler mishaps, a bite occurs quickly and many times without warning. Often the same child will be bitten **several times throughout their classmate's biting phase, leading the child's parents to feel that their little one is being targeted. These parents become quite angry in defense of their child, and they question if the class is being properly supervised.** When dealing with biting, the issue really isn't a matter of proper supervision, but more a matter of determining why this behavior continues to occur.

Toddlers don't always have self control and the ability to verbalize their thoughts. Biting is not a sign that your child is bad, nor is it a sign that you are a bad parent. It is more of an indicator that something is bothering your child and they are trying to find a way to communicate that to you, their teacher or their classmate.

Many times, **a toddler bites because they are extremely frustrated, and** in their eyes there is no solution. In one instant it happens, and you hear a loud screech - a screech like no other! For a brief moment all activity in the daycare stops, and all eyes are on the tear streaked face of a completely devastated child. "What could have happened?" Then you notice the child is rubbing his or her arm and your heart drops, because you now know what just happened. This child was just bit by a set of small, pearly white, very sharp, clenched teeth, and you now have the job of telling the parents of both parties involved. It's a scenario that teachers and parents dread.

So what can you do? When a child bites another child, always respond in a calm manner. Go immediately to the child who has been bitten and say, "Oh, that really hurts, doesn't it? I am so sorry this happened! That wasn't very nice of Johnny to do this! Let's go get some ice!"

Once you know the child that was hurt is OK and has ice on the bite, move on to the child who did the biting. Show the child the teeth marks and bruise that he or she inflicted, and how sad their friend has become. Most importantly, get face to face with the biter, look him or her straight in the eye and say in a very firm voice, **"No biting! Biting hurts and it is not a nice thing to do to your friend! I do not like it when you bite!"**

Remember, **a toddlers attention span is limited, so long lectures and explanations will not work.** The child must understand that you are very serious and very unhappy about the behavior that occurred. Now would be the time to try and determine the motive behind the bite. Ask the child that bit what happened and why they bit their friend. **At this age, many times the bite can be traced back to a "stolen" toy.** If this is the case, the appropriate response would be something like: "Oh, Johnny took your truck. I know Johnny should not have done that, but you still can't bite and hurt Johnny like that!"

Do not return the toy that was taken to the biter! You will actually be reinforcing and rewarding the negative behavior. The child that did the biting will see this as a success; they bit and got what they wanted. The act of biting doesn't deserve this type of reward. Instead, remove the child from the situation and the group, and set him or her up with a quiet activity like looking at a book. Let the child decompress and take a break for 10 to 15 minutes. After that amount of time has passed, their frustration should be gone, and they should be allowed to re-enter the group again.

After the child bites, keep a close eye on him or her. At our school we will shadow that child so that we can prevent a bite before it happens. If a situation occurs that we feel may result in an altercation, we will jump in and model positive ways to reach a resolution. For example, "Johnny is going to play with the car first and after 5 minutes it will be your turn Natalie." Or, "Natalie, you need to let Johnny play in the house, too. We must share the toys!" I will actually sit in the play house with them and monitor this area and intervene when necessary. For the most part, I try to let both parties work things out for themselves. Sometimes we make progress, and sometimes we don't.

When there is a child in the class that has a history of biting others, you will visibly witness the anxiety of other children the room increase. They are all afraid that they will be the next one that gets bit. You must watch a child who has bitten someone closely as he/she interacts with others. Warning signs may include increased over excitability in the child that bites. Crying, yelling, pushing and lunging can all be pre-cursors to a biting incident. If you notice signs of frustration, move the child to another area and calmly try to relax the child. Block, sand or water play, soothing music, softer lighting, and even certain scents can provide a peaceful, tranquil atmosphere that will quickly change the mood of a child whose emotions are running on high. In many cases it can change the course of the entire day for many upset, unhappy children.

When dealing with biting, it is important to realize that different factors can create this unwanted behavior. We discussed frustration, but biting may also occur because the child is tired, bored, over-excited, stressed, anxious, confused, or even hungry. As a parent or caregiver, analyze when this behavior occurs. Is it close to lunch time or nap time? Perhaps the behavior occurs during circle time. This may be a sign that circle time is too long and boredom and frustration are occurring. Is the behavior occurring during free play? If so, try limiting the number of children allowed to congregate in one area of the classroom to minimize fights and competition for the same toys. These activities may over-stimulate or create an environment of stress and anxiety for the child that bites. Once you have narrowed down the situations that seem to bring on this behavior, change what you can to minimize the stress, anxiety or overstimulation. You will find that the entire group actually benefits from this monitoring and restructuring. **A child who is stressed may need nothing more than some quiet time with a comforting, loving listener.**

Kind, understanding words like "I know that you are tired," or "I know that you don't feel like listening to a story right now," can go a long way. A little empathy is all a child may need from you. The feeling that someone is taking the time to listen and give a caring hug may make a huge difference in changing a child's mood. I sometimes take children to my office with me and let them color at my desk, or read a book or even help me sort some papers. This removes them from the classroom and the situation that was escalating their emotions, and gives them a quiet, loving space to relax in.

There are going to be times, though, that despite your vigilance, heightened awareness and careful supervision, a bite still occurs. It only takes a split second for a child to grab another's arm or hand and clamp down. Remember, no matter what the cause of biting, the response should always be clear, firm and consistent.

When biting occurs:

1. Remain calm. Do not lose your temper and bring a lot of attention to the situation.
2. Respond to the victim first and offer comfort and reassurance to the sad, hurt child. Put ice on the bite.
3. Be very firm with the biter and make it clear that you are not happy with the behavior that just occurred. Look the child in the eye and say, "No biting! Biting hurts!"
4. Remove the child that did the biting from the area and create a space that is quiet and stress free. Allow the child time to decompress and re-group.
5. Shadow a child who bites. Show positive examples to this child how to handle a situation. With consistency and reinforcement, this behavior should eventually rectify itself.
6. Praise helps. When the child with a history of biting handles a situation in a positive manner, make sure that you reward this behavior. "Oh Johnny, I loved how you just shared with Lily, I am so very proud of you!" Believe me, this works wonders!
7. Re-direction prevents problems! If I see that two children are getting on each other's last nerve, I will separate the children and put them into two different groups. One child will remain with me for one activity while the other goes with another teacher for a different activity. Simple, yet truly effective in preventing altercations!
8. Never bite a child! It doesn't teach them anything and only worsens the current situation and creates more anxiety and chaos!
9. After the child that bites has had a chance to calm down, allow him or her to re-enter the group. Monitor the situation at all times and jump in if needed. Remember to always model positive ways to resolve matters. Keep in mind that if you talk loud, the children will get loud, but if you talk in a quiet, calm manner, the children will remain calm. Parents and teachers are the role models and they create the environment.

Above all, remember that children who bite are good kids who are going through a phase. They will, in time, outgrow this phase. It may seem like a long time until this happens and each child will take a different amount of time. **Each child will need to work through the phase in their own time and in their own way, and while they are working through it, they grow and learn from each situation.**

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