

When Children Bite

You turn around to pick up a few stray toys, and it happens. Erin lets out a piercing scream. You rush over and there's the tell-tale signs-- red teeth marks on Erin's arm. Biting is one of the hardest behaviors to deal with in young children. While biting is very similar to hitting, it is much more dangerous. Because young children have more power in their jaw muscles than their arms, the resulting damage is more severe. And it can happen in an instant--even when you are standing right there!

Biting is quite common among toddlers and is a normal reaction for this age group. Children bite for many reasons. Sometimes they are teething and the biting feels good. Others seem to enjoy the strong reaction they get when they bite. Sometimes it starts out as a kiss and just goes too far. But most of the time biting occurs because a child is frustrated and does not have more acceptable responses to use in the situation. For example, the child may be involved in a task that is too difficult or may be playing with more children than the child can really handle. Or the child may be angry because someone tried to take away a toy. Because the child has not yet learned appropriate words or actions to express frustration he or she resorts to biting.

While some people try biting the child back, this technique is seldom effective. And it has the real disadvantage of teaching young children that it is okay for powerful adults to hurt children but not vice versa. Here are some positive guidance techniques that usually work:

Provide Close Supervision:

- ◇ Stay very near to the child to monitor things, especially in situations where you think biting is likely to occur.
- ◇ If the child does bite, immediately remove the child from the others.

Briefly explain that biting hurts others and will not be allowed. If you consistently remove the child when he or she bites, the child will learn that to play with others they must inhibit their biting.

Praise Children for Appropriate Behavior:

- ◇ Compliment the child when the child is playing well with others. This will help the child realize you value this kind of behavior. It will also help build their self-esteem.

Change the Situation:

- ◇ Provide easier toys and activities for the child.
- ◇ Provide more toys so there is less fighting over the toys.
- ◇ Decrease the number of children the child plays near.
- ◇ Shorten the playtime and/or watch more carefully to see when the child starts to "loose it."

Teach Acceptable Alternatives to Biting:

- ◇ Teach the child to say "no" if another child is doing something he doesn't like.
- ◇ Substitute a teething ring if the child looks like she is about to bite another child.

In addition to dealing with the child, it is also important to talk with parents, both the child's parents and the parents of the children in your care. Assure the parents that biting, although serious and not to be tolerated, is normal in very young children. Explain why biting occurs and the techniques you are using to help the child overcome the problem. This shows parents that you are knowledgeable about children and on top of the situation. While dealing with children who bite can be challenging, your efforts will help the child take one more step toward independence and self-control.

Source: Christine M. Todd, University of Illinois Cooperative Extension Service [Family Day Care Connections](#).