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# When a Child Bites

You pull into Jamie's childcare center at the end of the day and all the children are outside playing. You find Jamie busy in the sandbox. She's sitting next to two-year-old Casey and both are dumping, shoveling and pouring sand. It's a sunny day and the playground is filled with activity. You turn to wave at another parent and suddenly hear a loud shriek. When you turn back, you see your little Jamie with her teeth dug into Casey's arm.

You feel panic, embarrassment and horror. How will Casey's parents react? Why did this happen? Who is to blame? Is something wrong with your child?

Biting is normal and common among toddlers. It's especially common in group settings where young children have to share space, toys and the attention of adults. It may be easy to blame childcare providers, but biting is hard for them to prevent. Often when one child bites, others copy the behavior. Rather than responding in anger when your child bites, handle the situation quickly, firmly and as calmly as possible.



## Take control

Step in immediately to comfort the child who was bitten. For example, walk over and get between Casey and Jamie. Check on Casey's arm. Quiet her cries and give her some reassurance. It's also a good idea to say "Everything is OK," to the other children nearby. They may have been frightened by Casey's screams.

When Casey calms down, she will need to have the bite washed. An ice pack may make it feel better.

Jamie needs some attention too. Calmly and firmly tell Jamie that she is not allowed to bite. Look her in the eye and tell her, "I don't like it when you hurt people." Tell her how her behavior affected the other child, "It hurts when you bite. Casey is crying."

You may remove Jamie from the area where she was playing but punishment probably won't help. Jamie may already feel tense and frightened by her own behavior and Casey's reaction. In all the confusion, she may misunderstand what she did wrong. It's usually more helpful to quickly turn her attention to a quiet and relaxing activity. When biting occurs, both children feel frightened and out of control. By taking control of the situation, you will help them to calm down and feel better.

## Ask questions

After the immediate crisis is over, think about the situation. What was happening on the playground? Who was around? What time of the day was it? What were the children playing with? Was there an event that led to biting?

Asking these kinds of questions can help adults understand why a child may bite. If biting happens in a childcare setting, you will also want to talk to the childcare providers. Has this happened before? Have other children been biting? If a child bites repeatedly, these clues are especially important. Looking for a pattern can be the key to breaking the biting habit.

### **Why do children bite?**

Toddlers bite for many different reasons. Understanding the reasons for biting can help adults think of ways to prevent children from biting again.

#### ***Teething***

For teething toddlers, biting feels good to sore gums. To prevent teething toddlers from biting other children, keep plenty of chewable toys around. A frozen wash cloth can help to sooth a child's gums. Frozen bagels or chewy food like bananas are good to bite.

#### ***Exploration***

Toddlers learn about the world through their senses. They touch, squeeze and taste new things around them. To them it feels natural to bite. To prevent them from biting others, give children plenty of colorful washable toys to grab, bite and chew on.

#### ***Independence***

Toddlers are learning how their actions can make things happen. Sometimes biting is a way for them to feel in control of a situation. Children need positive opportunities to take control. Give them simple choices to help them feel independent. If your child is likely to bite another child to get a toy, offer some other toys. Say "Would you like to play with your truck or doll?" or "Would you like to swing or ride in the wagon?"

#### ***Anxiety***

Sometimes a lot of noise and activity are too much to handle. If a child has trouble calming down in the middle of all the commotion, he or she may lose control and bite another child. A stressful experience, like the divorce of parents or being separated from parents, also can cause a child to feel tense. When you provide comfort, reassurance and a break from active situations, a child will be less likely to bite.

#### ***Attention***

Children sometimes bite because they get a strong reaction from adults or other children who are around. In this case, preventing biting takes careful watching. When it looks as though your child is ready to bite, remain calm. Instead of reacting with angry attention, redirect your child's attention. Say, "Would you like to look at a book with me or play in the sand?"

Also, if children get attention for positive behavior, they will be less likely to bite to get a reaction. Make sure to notice your child when he or she does what you like. Say, "I like it when you play next to your friend. Can you show me how you use your shovel?"

#### ***Competition***

Toddlers are old enough to actively play next to other children, but they don't understand cooperation and sharing. Putting them together can lead to competition over space, toys and attention. For example, Jamie may have bitten because Casey was too close or had a toy she wanted. At age two, Jamie can't understand another person's feelings. She doesn't realize that her bite hurts. This is why she may look confused and frightened by the reaction she gets.

Provide plenty of space and toys for toddlers and preschool children. Give them room to explore. You may also

redirect children who are competing for toys or space to another activity. It takes many years to learn to share, but bites will decrease as children mature. Teach about sharing by sharing *your* time and by playing cooperatively with your child.

### ***Frustration***

Toddlers do not yet have the ability to put their feelings into words. They can't explain "I feel tense," "I want attention," or "I want that toy." Biting is one way to release frustration. Teach children to use words when frustrated. For example say to your toddler, "If your playmate, Mike, is in your way, say, "Please move, Mike." Praise children when they begin to use words instead of biting, pushing or hitting. Even if the word is "Mine!" or "No!", it's preferable to biting.

### ***Imitation***

Young children who bite may be imitating other children. In this case, parents and childcare providers will have to work hard to break the cycle. They will have to watch children closely and use the methods described above to prevent bites.



### **Never bite back**

Some people advise parents to bite children back so they can learn that biting hurts another person. This is not a good idea. If adults bite children, children learn that it's okay to bite to work out problems. It also sends the message that bigger and stronger people can get away with biting smaller, weaker people.

### **When biting becomes a habit**

If biting occurs frequently, parents and child care providers have to take more drastic actions. Sometimes children are asked to leave child care centers because their biting is out of control. Also, if a child is still biting at the age of 3, 4, or 5, he or she may need professional help. In these cases, breaking the habit may involve having a single person constantly watching the child. That person will be there to step in and prevent bites. He or she can also give the child praise and encouragement for solving problems without biting.

Biting is frightening for children and exhausting for parents. It may seem like a never-ending ordeal. However, most children stop biting when they learn to talk and express their feelings, needs and desires. In the meantime, take steps to prevent biting.

### **Remember**

- Provide toys for chewing
- Give children simple choices
- Provide comfort and a break from activity
- Redirect children to other activities
- Teach children to use words to express their needs and feelings.

### **Sources:**

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