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Biting

Toddlers do the most adorable things: Give unexpected hugs, squeal with laughter, and cuddle up to you when they're tired.

But as any parent of a toddler will tell you, they also do some not-so-adorable things, like kick, scream ... or bite.

Biting is quite common in kids this age, but that's little consolation if your toddler bites. After all, no one wants their child to be considered the menace of the play group. And worse yet, kids who are labeled "biters" often get excluded from childcare centers — a challenge that no working parent wants to face.

You may think biting is just another phase you'll have to live through, but that's not necessarily the case. There are ways to get to the bottom of your toddler's biting habit. Here's how to help curb this type of behavior.

Why Toddlers Bite

Believe it or not, biting is a normal part of early childhood development. Babies and toddlers bite for a variety of reasons, such as teething or exploring a new toy or object with their mouth ("mouthing"). As they begin to understand cause-and-effect, they also might bite a person to see if they can get a reaction.

Biting also can be a way for toddlers to get attention or express how they're feeling. Frustration, anger, and fear are strong emotions and toddlers lack the language skills to deal with them. So if they can't find the words they need quickly enough or can't articulate how they're feeling, they may resort to biting as a way of saying, "Pay attention to me!" or "I don't like that!"

Biting is slightly more common in boys and tends to occur most often between the first and second birthday. As language skills develop, so do coping skills and biting tends to lessen.

How to Curb Biting

With biting, it's important to address the behavior immediately after it happens. The next time your child bites another child, separate the kids involved and try these steps:

- **Step 1: Comfort the victim first.** Direct your attention to the person who has been bitten, especially if it's another child. Addressing the wrong-doer first may reinforce this negative behavior if he or she bites to get attention. If there is an injury, clean the area with soap and water and apply ice.
- **Step 2: Be calm and firm.** Address your child with a firm, "no biting!" or "biting hurts!" Keep it simple and easy for a toddler to understand. Make it clear that biting is wrong, but avoid lengthy explanations until your child is old enough to understand. Remaining as calm as possible will help to resolve the situation more quickly.
- **Step 3: Comfort the biter, if need be.** Oftentimes, toddlers may not realize that biting hurts. It's OK to comfort a child who may be feeling upset about hurting a friend.
- **Step 4: Offer alternatives.** When things have calmed down, suggest alternatives to biting, like using the words "no," "stop," and "that's mine" when wanting to communicate with others.
- **Step 5: Redirect.** Distraction works wonders with kids this age. If emotions and energy levels are running high or if boredom has set in, help redirect a little one's attention to a more positive activity, like dancing to music, coloring, or playing a game.

Punishment is usually not necessary at this age, since biting is normal and most kids don't realize that their actions can cause harm to others.

If, on the other hand, you've tried the steps above and the behavior doesn't stop, timeouts may be effective. Older toddlers (2-3) may be taken to a designated timeout area — a kitchen chair or bottom stair — for a minute or two to calm down.

As a general rule, about 1 minute per year of age is a good guide for timeouts. Shorter timeouts can be effective, but longer ones have no added benefit and can sometimes undermine your efforts if your little one gets up (and refuses to return) before you signal that the timeout has ended.

Creating a 'Bite-Free' Environment

Whether you feel like you've made progress with your child's biting habit or it continues to be a work-in-progress, it's important to create a zero-tolerance culture at home and when out and about.

Here are some ways to get your little one back on the right track:

- **Be consistent.** Reinforce the "No biting" rule at all times.
- **Use positive reinforcement.** Rather than reward negative actions with attention, make it a point to praise your child when he or she behaves well. This may help prevent your child from biting in the first place.
- **Plan ahead.** Toddlers might be more comfortable and not feel the urge to bite if they know what to expect in new or high-energy situations. If biting occurs at daycare, tell your child what to expect each day. If a larger, more chaotic environment seems overwhelming, you might consider putting your child in a smaller setting.
- **Find alternatives.** As your child's language skills develop, you can help him or her find other, safer ways to express negative emotions. For example, asking children to "use their words" when frustrated or upset can help calm them. If you need help, a doctor, counselor, or behavioral specialist can discuss ways to teach your child to manage strong emotions and express feelings in a healthy way.

When to Seek Help

Although biting is common in babies and toddlers, excessive biting and other hostile behaviors might indicate that something is troubling your child. Also, biting that continues past $\frac{2}{3}$ to 3 years of age might be a sign of something else.

If you're concerned about your child's behavior, talk to your pediatrician about finding out its causes as well as ways to deal with it.

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