



## Understanding and preventing toddler biting

**M**ichael, age 14 months, picks up a yellow truck, pushes it onto a low table, and lets it drop to the floor. Ka-thud.

Katie, 16 months, takes an interest in the object that falls a few inches from where she is sitting. She lets go of the small green ball in her right hand and grabs the truck.

Michael crawls over and reaches for the truck. Both pull with all their might. Michael glares at Katie, opens his mouth, and bites her forearm.

Katie sits stunned for a moment, then screams, “Ayyyyy.”

Ms. Jones, the caregiver, looks up from changing a diaper to see Michael grasping the truck to his chest. Katie glances down at her arm, leans back her head, and wails.

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**“No, biting is not OK.”**

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A biting incident creates distress for everyone. A child gets hurt. Caregivers feel shocked and often helpless. Parents, hearing that their child got bitten or did the biting, get angry. Caregivers find themselves caught in the middle. The more they try to explain, the more defensive they become.

Biting is a common problem in children 12 to 36 months old. Not all toddlers bite as part of their social behavior, but the few that do can create havoc in a child care group. Understanding why children bite and taking precautions can help reduce biting incidents and prevent them from happening.

### Why children bite

Experts disagree about the exact cause of biting. Infants and toddlers who are teething sometimes bite others to apply pressure to their gums. Other children sometimes bite while trying to give kisses and show affection.

Many toddlers, however, bite during or after periods of conflict. For this reason, experts believe that most biting is a primitive form of communication.

Toddlers face conflicts every day while learning social skills, language, and self-control. During conflicts, intense negative feelings like frustration, anger, fear, and confusion build up. “*Strong feelings, such as anger, overwhelm and thus frighten young children,*” says Janice Beaty, author of a number of college early childhood textbooks. Young children who don’t know how to control negative emotions are most likely to use methods like biting to stop uncomfortable situations.

“*They may be trying to control and master a frightening situation by taking action that makes them feel less helpless,*” says Alicia Lieberman (1993). Eleanor Reynolds (1996) further explains that toddlers may not completely understand that their actions hurt others. Until children reach 24 months, they most likely will not be able to make the connection between their mouths and another child’s pain.

Sometimes caregivers or parents assume that a child bites as part of a hateful plan or intent to do harm. However, “*detailed observation shows that the child is merely confused or responding to the behavior of others,*” writes Naomi Richman (1988).

Biting normally stops by age three. If it continues after the third year, it may indicate other problems. In that case, caregivers can refer parents and the child for counseling.

### **What to do when biting occurs**

When one child bites another, immediately make it clear that the behavior is unacceptable (Douglas, 1989). Whether the cause is sore gums or a fight over a toy, the first response is to say, “No, biting is not OK.”

In a case of conflict, such as the example of Michael and Katie, acknowledge the biter’s emotions without condoning the actions. This lets the child know that feelings are acceptable and normal but that behavior must be controlled when it harms others (Weissbourd, 1994). Emphasize the consequences: “*I know you’re frustrated, but I can’t let you bite your friends. It hurts them.*”

Attend to the biting victim, offering comfort and first aid as necessary. Cover the bite with a cold wet washcloth, and soothe the child’s tears. The biter then witnesses the extent of the pain. This comforting action can help toddlers understand consequences. It also conveys the message that hurting others is not a way for biters to get attention for themselves.

When biters are older than two years, involve them in the care of the wounded to further emphasize the painful consequences. Be careful, however, that the biter does not make a game out of comforting victims. If it becomes a game, do not allow the biter to help (Reynolds, 1996).

Never bite children to show them “*how it feels*” or encourage children to bite back. This only signals acceptance of such behavior and creates another victim (Reynolds, 1996). Besides, harming children is ethically wrong and can raise legal issues.

### **What are the biter’s patterns?**

Once a child has bitten someone, caregivers need to supervise the group carefully and look for situations that can trigger more biting behavior. Physical well-being, environment, and emotional stress all play their part, says Patsy McCreary, infant-toddler development professor at Austin Community College. Adults need to take these factors into consideration to help improve the way children deal with emotions. “*Fixing a symptom without addressing the problem will only result in new symptoms,*” she says.

### **Here are some tips for observing children:**

- **Examine the child’s physical state.** Look for connections between the child’s physical well-being and tendency to bite. Does Michael bite when uncomfortable, in pain, or sick? Does he bite only when he is cutting new teeth?
- **Check the child’s schedule** and daily report. The child may tend to bite when hungry or sleepy. Check for bowel irregularities. Children may be more likely to bite when experiencing discomfort with their bodies, says McCreary.
- **Look at the environment.** Toddlers learn through exploration and experimentation. Their bodies need to exercise as they grow. Ideally, the toddler room allows for natural curiosity and movement. When the child is feeling unchallenged, stir crazy, or overly frustrated, says McCreary, anxiety and emotions can build up and increase the tendency to bite.
- **Pay attention to emotions.** Biting can be related to the toddler’s response to a new situation. New places and people, especially new siblings, can cause anxiety for children that can carry over into their everyday activities. Fights, arguments, and the disappearance of loved ones can have a negative impact. A biting child may be responding to anger, unease, or sadness. Toddlers are just learning to interpret these emotions and may be confused by them. Any outside stress can increase conflicts, which may result in biting.

## How to prevent biting

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Understanding the cause and pattern of biting can help you anticipate it and prevent it from happening. Use your observations of children to make changes, such as the following.

- **Provide** duplicates of toys so children won't fight over them. When Michael and Katie each have a yellow truck, they will be less likely to grab the other's.
- **Provide** toys and furnishings appropriate to the children's level of development. Check to see whether toys and climbing structures challenge children reasonably without overdoing it.
- **Adjust** the schedule so that toddlers can eat when they are hungry and nap when they are sleepy.
- **Verbalize** children's feelings and concerns before they lose control. "You look angry, Michael. Tell Katie to stop pulling. You don't like that." Children understand language far before they learn to use it (Lieberman, 1993). Giving words to feelings helps contain them and make the feelings bearable.
- **Be specific.** Avoid abstract statements such as, "Stop being mean, Katie." Instead, say, "Michael is angry, Katie, because you're taking his truck." Describing what is happening helps children learn words to use. "Expressing anger in words is not easy in the beginning," according to Beaty. "It does not come naturally for young children." They need examples set by adults.
- For younger toddlers, **demonstrate** what you mean when you use words like "gentle" and "nice." To demonstrate "gentle," for example, you might place one hand on Michael to get his attention, and softly rub Katie's arm. Through sight and touch, Michael can then understand what the word means.
- When necessary, **step in physically.** Young toddlers learn better from protective actions than from words alone (Lieberman, 1993). McCreary suggests that while verbally addressing the conflict, gently but firmly

place a hand on the child losing control or move the children away from each other. Explain why this is necessary. "I can't let you hurt your friends. You need to calm your body and be safe."

- **Remove the biter** from the group only when the child has lost control and is no longer safe as a playmate. "Time out is often used with toddlers", says McCreary, "but they are too young to fully understand its purpose. Moving children out of each other's reach is usually all you need to do." When it is clear that the child has calmed down, group play can resume.

Biting is not always preventable. Most toddlers bite simply because they have no other way of expressing stress and anxiety. By responding promptly and helping children learn to express their feelings in words, caregivers can help toddlers gain more control over their behavior.

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## About the author

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