

## DEFINITION

Biting another child is one of the more unacceptable aggressive behaviors in our society. The parent of the child who has been bitten is usually very upset and worried about the risk of infection. If it happens in a child-care setting, the other parents want the biter to be expelled. If it happens in another's home, the child is often told never to return. Adults tend to forget that some biting behavior in a group of toddlers is to be expected. Most children first learn to bite by doing it to their parents in a playful manner. It is important to try to interrupt this primitive behavior at this early stage.

## Causes

Biting is usually a chance discovery around 1 year of age, at a time when teething and mouthing are normal behaviors. It often continues because the parents initially think it is cute and the child considers it a type of game to get attention. Later, children may use it when they are frustrated and want something from another child. At this age for children with minimal verbal skills, biting becomes a primitive form of communication. Only after 2 or 3 years of age can it become a deliberate way to express anger and intimidate others.

## RECOMMENDATIONS FOR DEALING WITH BITING

1. **Establish a rule.** "We never bite people." Give your child a reason for the rule, namely, that biting hurts. Other reasons (that won't interest him at his age) are that bites can lead to infection or scarring.
2. **Suggest a safe alternative behavior.** Tell your child if he wants something he should come to you and ask for help or point to it, rather than bite the person who has it. If he bites when he is angry, tell him "If you are mad, come to me and tell me." If your child is at the chewing everything stage (usually less than 18 months), help him choose a toy that he can bite rather than telling him that he cannot bite anything. A firm toy or teething ring will do. Encourage him to carry his "chewy" with him for a few days.
3. **Interrupt biting with a sharp "no."** Be sure to use an unfriendly voice and look your child straight in the eye. Try to interrupt him when he looks like he might bite somebody, before he actually does it, leaving the victim hurt and screaming. Extra close supervision may be necessary until the biting has stopped.
4. **Give your child a time-out for biting others.** Send him to a boring place for approximately 1

minute per year of age. If he attempts to bite you while you are holding him, say "no," always put him down immediately, and walk away (a form of time-out). If time-out does not work, take away a favorite toy for the remainder of the day.

5. **Never bite your child for biting someone else.** Biting back will make your child upset that you hurt him and may teach him that it is okay to bite if you are bigger. Also do not wash his mouth out with soap, pinch his cheek, or slap his mouth. In fact, if your child tends to be aggressive, avoid physical punishment in general (e.g., spanking). Also eliminate "love bites," since your child will be unable to distinguish them from painful biting.
6. **Praise your child for not biting.** The most important time to praise him is when he is in situations or with particular children where he used to frequently bite. Initially give him a kind reminder just before these high-risk visits. Then praise him afterward for good behavior.
7. **Prevention.** The best time to stop a biting behavior from becoming a habit is when it first starts. Be sure that no one laughs when he bites and that no one treats it like a game. (This includes older siblings.) Also never "give in" to your child's demands because of biting. Since biting commonly occurs in child-care settings, be sure the providers understand your approach and are willing to apply it.
8. **Biting in child-care settings.** Biting behavior is common in child-care settings. The preceding approach should be used by day care staff to eliminate the behavior in their setting. Provide careful supervision and quickly place the biting child in time-out, even when he acts like he might bite someone. In general, biting is harmless since most bites by younger children don't puncture the skin. Calling the parent at work is pointless since the problem should be dealt with immediately by whoever witnesses it.



## CALL OUR OFFICE

### IMMEDIATELY if

- Biting causes a puncture or a cut that completely breaks the skin.

### During regular hours if

- Biting behavior lasts for more than 4 weeks with this approach.
- Your child bites or hurts himself.
- Your child has several other behavior problems.
- You have other questions or concerns.