



Dealing with Biting Behavior in Young Children

Important Information by School Psychologist, Dr. Jonathan Dobkowski

Toddlerhood can be summed up in one sentence: It is the stage of exploration. During the course of this exploration, children need to be free to explore their environment, to use both their small and large muscles, to walk, run, climb, and jump, to play with toys, and to try new sounds as their language develops. If children are allowed and encouraged to do all of these things freely it will help them acquire feelings of self-confidence.

In contrast, if a child is forced to adapt to a purely "adult" environment and is surrounded by what seems to be a thousand "no-no's" and restrictions, the child will begin to develop feelings of self-doubt. One of the challenging behaviors that parents of toddlers are faced is dealing with biting behavior in young children. Biting behavior creates a feeling of embarrassment and fear in the parents of these toddlers and is a cause of concern for parents and child caregivers. Before delving into why young children bite and what interventions can be put into place to help improve this behavior, it is essential to point out that **biting is a normal developmental phase for toddlers**. Furthermore, because of the developmental nature involved in most biting situations, this behavior is not something that can be blamed on the child, parents, or teachers.

Bitng is a form of communication for young children. Young children often do not have the language skills that are necessary to control a frustrating or compromising situation and therefore resort to biting in order to express their needs. In addition, toddlers have yet to acquire the skill of planning ahead and often act instinctively on what they are experiencing in the moment (i.e., frustration, exuberance, anger, etc.).



Strategies that parents can implement in order to help prevent and/or limit biting behavior:

- 🌳 Parents should make sure that the child's schedule, routines, and transitions are predictable and consistent.
- 🌳 Observe your child to learn where, when, and in what situations biting occurs.
- 🌳 If a parent sees the biting incident, they should respond immediately. The parent should get down to the child's level, and in a calm, firm tone make a statement such as "No biting. Biting hurts and is not allowed." The parent should model the use of words that describe feelings (i.e., "Although you were angry when your brother took your toy, he was hurt and felt sad when you bit him").
- 🌳 Parents should respond to the child who was hurt by offering comfort through words and actions.
- 🌳 Help your child to learn to communicate his wants and needs through more adaptive means. Consistently promoting the child's language development can help reduce biting behavior.
- 🌳 Consistently reinforce positive behavior by acknowledging and praising the child's appropriate words and actions in challenging situations.
- 🌳 Avoid labeling a child as a "biter." Negative labels can impact how a parent views their child and can even affect how a child feels about him/herself.
- 🌳 Avoid raising your voice, getting angry, and punishing a child for his/her biting behavior. Giving too much negative attention can reinforce and strengthen the behavior. Furthermore, punishment does not help the child learn the skill of discipline and self-control.

It is important to keep in mind that the nature of a toddler is that he or she is a tireless explorer of everything that comes within reach. It is critical that parents provide their young children with an environment where the child is free to roam and explore. A toddler does not engage in a challenging behavior (I think my children have ripped out approximately 1,000 pages from their book collection) in order to defy and challenge his or her parent. Rather they are merely exploring their environment and learning each step of the way.