

THIS BITES!

Why Do Toddlers Bite?

Many parents or guardians get very frustrated when their child is affected by biting – whether because their child is biting others or their child is the one getting bitten. While it can be distressing, parents should not worry too much about biting; it is not abnormal. There are reasons why children bite and ways to help them move forward and out of this stage.

Why Do Children Bite?

Understanding why a child bites is the first step in reducing or stopping the behavior. Here are the most common causes:

- Difficulty communicating
- Seeking attention
- Exploring their surroundings using their senses
- Coping with feelings

Most often a child bites others because he or she is frustrated when trying to communicate. Some children often don't know how to express their feelings and have difficulty communicating. Younger children, in particular, have not yet developed verbal skills which can lead to biting. If a child wants a toy, an object or even food, and they cannot adequately communicate that, they might reach out and bite. Children learn quickly that doing so will get them the object that they want.

Naturally, attention follows a bite. Even negative attention is better than no attention and the child just wants to be noticed and not ignored. As with wanting objects, a child will learn very quickly that they can get much desired attention when they bite and then they become more apt to repeat the behavior.

Another common cause of biting is simple sensory exploration. A child may just want to see what something tastes like, not knowing that it hurts. As all parents know, just about everything a toddler or infant picks up eventually ends up in their mouth. At this age they do not know and are not able to prevent themselves from putting things in their mouth and biting is a somewhat natural next step.

Finally, another common cause of biting is coping with feelings. When children are bored, hungry, or even tired they don't know how to express their emotions or cope with the stress of some things that happen to them. For instance, if someone takes their toy or if there are no

more cookies for them to have, they don't know how to express their frustration or anger and they may resort to biting to try and get what they want.

How to Get Through a Biting Phase

Once you understand why your child may be biting, it is a little easier to help prevent it. Although this is a developmental stage some children go through, that doesn't mean it is acceptable and you do have to take action if your child is biting others.

You can start by teaching your child simple words or phrases such as, "that hurts," "we don't bite," and "that is not nice" or simple sign language such as *Help* or *Stop*. This can take time and usually change doesn't happen overnight. As a parent or guardian, continue to find when and why your child is biting and pay attention to warning signs. Be patient. If your child is in an early childhood or child care setting, see if they are shadowing your child or the child who is biting. You can ask them for suggestions or what they are doing so it is the same at home and consistent.

Talk to your child and explain that teeth are for chewing foods, not friends or people. Some children find that eating chewy and crunchy foods help to ease the biting. You can also read books to them about biting. A few good ones are "Teeth are Not for Biting" by Elizabeth Verdick or "No Biting" by Karen Katz.

A few important things to avoid doing:

- **Don't bite your child back.** This will only confuse them and teach them that biting is acceptable. This just reinforces what you are trying to undo.
- **Don't use harsh punishments such as scolding, yelling or any form of physical punishing.** These might increase your child's anxiety or fear and increase the biting.

Instead, do praise your child when they follow directions, redirect them into another activity, and always say "we do not bite" firmly as you do.

Usually this phase will pass in a couple of weeks if you are consistent. Be patient and this will be a milestone of the past.