



# Understanding Children

## Biting



You've just discovered that you have a pint-sized biter on your hands.

Isn't it amazing how those tiny teeth that once caused so much excitement and celebration can now cause so much fear and frustration?

Biting, however, is quite common among young children. It happens for different reasons with different children and under different circumstances. Understanding the reason for your child's biting is the first step to changing his or her behavior.

### ■ Why children bite

#### Exploration

Infants and toddlers learn by touching, smelling, hearing, and tasting. If an infant is given a toy, one of the first places the infant puts it is in the mouth. Tasting or "mouthing" things is something that all children do. Children this

age do not always understand the difference between gnawing on a toy and biting someone.

#### Teething

Children generally begin teething about age 4 to 7 months. Swelling gums can be tender and can cause a great deal of discomfort. Infants sometimes find relief from this discomfort by chewing on something. Sometimes the object they chomp on is a real person! Children this age may not understand the difference between chewing on a person or a toy.

#### Cause and effect

About age 12 months infants become interested in finding out what happens when they do something. When they bang a spoon on the table, they discover that it makes a loud sound. When they drop a toy from their crib, they discover



that it falls. They also may discover that when they bite someone, they get a loud scream of protest!

**Attention**

Older toddlers may bite to get attention. When children are in situations in which they do not receive enough positive attention and daily interaction, they often find a way to make others sit up and take notice. Being ignored is not fun. Biting

is a quick way to become the center of attention, even if it is negative attention.

**Imitation**

Older toddlers love to imitate others and find it a great way to learn new things. Sometimes children see others bite and decide to try it themselves. When an adult bites a child back in punishment, it generally does not stop the biting, but rather teaches the child that biting is OK.

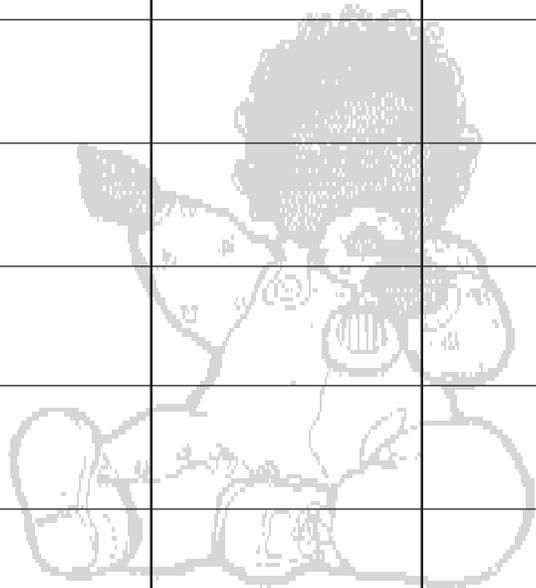
**Independence**

Toddlers are trying hard to be independent. “Mine” and “Me do it” are favorite words. Learning to do things without help, making choices, and needing control over a situation are part of growing up. Biting is a powerful way to control others. If you want a toy or want a playmate to leave you alone or move out of your way, biting helps you get what you want.



**Biting—What’s really happening?**

	1st Incident	2nd Incident	3rd Incident
Where did the biting incident happen?			
Who was involved?			
When did the biting happen?			
What happened before the biting incident?			
What happened after? How was the situation handled?			
Why do you think the biting might be happening? (You may want to review ideas in this publication.)			



What will be your plan of action?

Prevention ideas: \_\_\_\_\_

Teaching new behavior: \_\_\_\_\_

Try your action plan for at least a few weeks. Good luck!

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## Frustration

Young children often experience frustration. Growing up is a real struggle. Drinking from a cup is great, yet nursing or sucking from a bottle is also wonderful. Sometimes it would be nice to remain a baby. Toddlers don't have good control over their bodies yet. A loving pat sometimes turns into a push or a whack. Toddlers also don't talk well yet. They have trouble asking for things or requesting help. They haven't learned how to play with others. When you don't have words to express your feelings, sometimes you show others by hitting, pushing, or biting.

## Stress

A child's world can be stressful at times. A lack of daily routine, interesting things to do, or adult interaction are stressful situations for children. Events like death, divorce, or a move to a new home also cause stress for children. Biting is one way to express feelings and relieve

## ■ What parents can do What is really happening?

Use the who, what, when, where, and how method to discover what is really happening. When does the biting occur? Who is involved? Where does it happen? What happens before or afterward? How was the situation handled?

## Try prevention

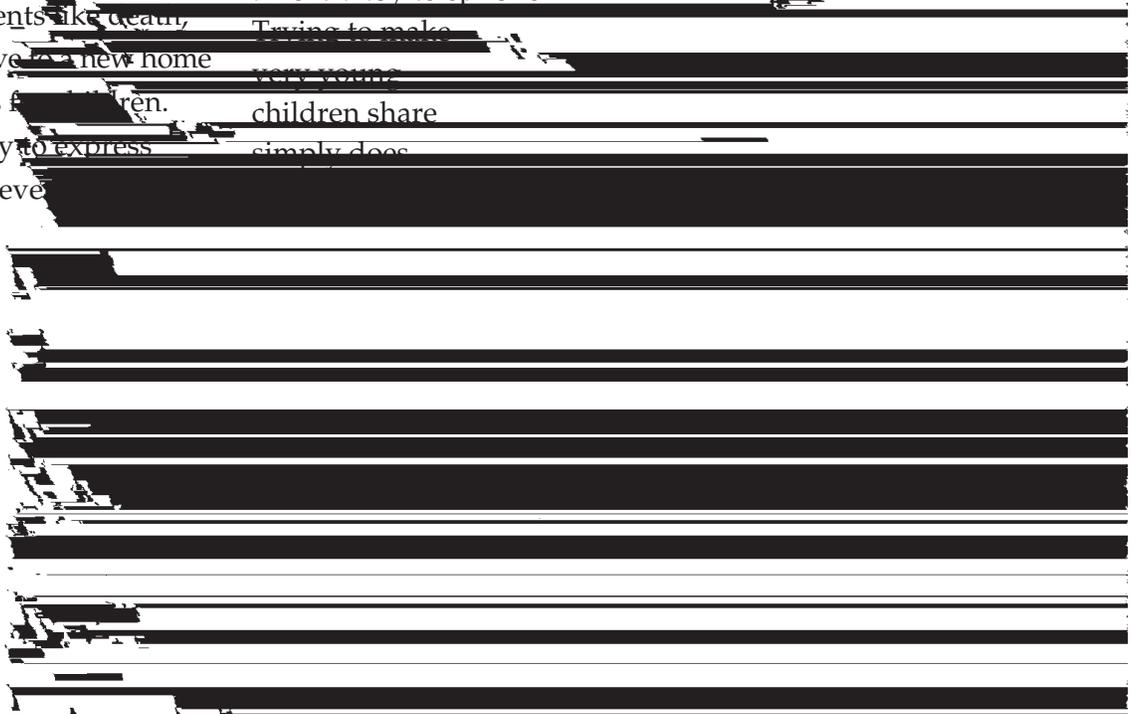
If you determine that the biting occurs as the result of exploration or teething, you may want to provide the child with a cloth or teething ring to gnaw on. If your child seems to bite when tired or hungry, you may want to look at your daily routine to be sure that he or she is getting enough sleep and nourishment.

If biting happens when two children fight over a toy telephone, you may want to purchase an extra toy telephone.

Toddlers don't have the skills or understanding to negotiate or understand another child's point of view.

If attention seems to be the main cause for biting, try to spend time with your child when he or she is doing more positive things. Snuggle up and read a book together or roll a ball back and forth. This is much more fun than giving or receiving a scolding.

If the child is experiencing a stressful situation, make life as supportive and normal as possible. Predictable meals and bedtimes, and extra time with a loving adult can help. Some activities can actually relieve tension. Examples are rolling, squishing, and pounding play



dough, or relaxing and splashing in the bathtub. It takes time and patience, however, for healing to occur in painful situations like divorce or death.

## Teach new behavior

When a child bites, use your voice and facial expressions to show that biting is unacceptable. Speak firmly and look directly into the child's eyes. For example, you might say "Sara, it's not OK to bite. It hurts Jon when you bite him. He's crying. If you need to bite, you can bite this (cloth, toy, food, etc.), but I won't let you bite Jon or another child." If the child is able to talk, you also might say, "You can tell Jon with your words that you need him to move instead of biting him. Say 'Move, Jon.'"

You also may want the biter to help wash, bandage, and comfort the victim. Making the biter a part of the comforting process is a good way to teach nurturing behavior.

Whenever the biter is out of control, you will need to restrain or isolate the child until he or she calms down. Insist on a "time out" or "cooling-off period." Wait a few minutes until the child is under control and then talk to the toddler about his or her behavior.

## ■ A final note

Biting is a difficult and uncomfortable issue to deal with for parents. If your child is the victim, you may feel angry and outraged. If your child is the biter, you may feel embarrassed and frustrated.

Take heart! Most toddlers who bite do so only a short while. Paying close attention to the reasons will help you come up with some useful solutions. Soon your toddler will have learned important new skills for communicating and getting along with others.

## ■ Read more about it!

For more information about children and families ask for the following publications from your county extension office.

*1-2-3 Grow* (newsletter series for toddler years), PM 1071a-h (cost)

*Understanding Children: Disciplining your toddler*, PM 1529c

*Child's Play - Art*, PM 1770a (cost)

*Understanding Children: Language development*, PM 1529f

*Child's Play - Fingerplays Plus*, PM 1770b (cost)

*Ages and Stages*, PM 1530a-i

