

WHEN CHILDREN BITE

How to Stop a Child from Biting

An estimated 10 percent of toddlers bite, and they bite for a variety of reasons.

They may be experimenting, testing their world and the people in it to see how they taste or feel in their mouths. Others find that biting something or someone relieves the discomfort that can accompany teething.

For some children, their verbal skills may not be at a level that enables them to express their needs and emotions with words, so they bite out of frustration. Children who have been physically abused or suffered a traumatic event, such as losing a parent, may bite out of self-defense. They don't feel safe in their world and react in a basic mode of self-preservation.

Then, there are children who derive a sense of power from biting. They are able to get the response or the attention they want when they bite.

Whatever the reason, a child who bites can be a danger to others, and that behavior must be stopped. No parent wants their child to bite or to be bitten. The potential health risks are compounded when the biter or the bitten is chronically infected with viral hepatitis.

The tools to stop this behavior are varied and none are guaranteed to work. When "fixes" and behavior modification fail, tension can mount.

Here are some tips from parents, educators and physicians on how to stop a child from biting. Every parent is encouraged to check with their child's pediatrician before trying any of these suggestions. If a child is in preschool or daycare, sharing one's plan of action and encouraging staff participation can help eliminate this behavior. Consistency when trying to correct the behavior is key.

Just Say No

If a baby or toddler decides to experiment by sinking her teeth into someone's flesh, say "NO" in a sharp tone. It could be that he or she is simply curious or perhaps experiencing teething pain. Offer these children cold teething rings, frozen bagels, teething biscuits, large cold carrots or anything of a similar nature that might ease their pain.

Make sure they have lots of colorful toys around to stimulate them and capture their attention.

Positive Reinforcement

Some children bite out of frustration. They don't have the verbal skills to communicate their feelings or needs, so they bite. When this happens, tend to the victim and get the biter involved in helping the victim, then explain to the biter that biting hurts others and is against the rules.

Give positive reinforcement to these biters when they communicate appropriately.

In the future, watch for signs of building frustration and redirect the biter's attention before the child reaches his or her boiling point.

Using a monthly calendar, put a sticker on the days that the biter doesn't bite. If he or she is biting every day, put the sticker on the calendar and give him or her an inexpensive toy on the first day he or she doesn't bite.

Keep rewarding with stickers each day the child doesn't bite, but increase the time between toy rewards as he or she responds to positive reinforcement. Ideally, one should have five days of stickers before receiving a toy. There will be lapses, but the biter should soon become more interested in the stickers and toys than in biting.

After four weeks of this reward system, give the (ex)-biter a graduation party. Make him or her feel proud of this accomplishment.

Reassurance

Other children bite to protect themselves. They may be overwhelmed by all the goings-on and will bite to regain control. Reassuring the child that he or she is safe and redirecting him or her when he or she tenses up is helpful.

Blowing Off Steam

Although biting is a no-no, children do need to let off steam. If a child is a biter, allow him or her to express frustration by crying or having a temper tantrum. He or she needs to get these feelings out in a way that harms no one.

Attention at the Right Time

There are children who, even at a young age, exhibit bullying behavior. They bite because it gives them a sense of power and control, and they like the fact that they get attention when they bite. Be sure to give this child attention when he or she is not biting and this may help the situation.

Time-outs

Time-outs are popular. The biter goes to a corner and cannot play with others and receives no attention. Generally, a child is given one minute of time-out for each year of age; a 5 year-old, for example, gets five minutes of time out.

Taste This

One school of thought is that biters tend to have “oral issues” and therefore putting something unpleasant in the child’s mouth just after he or she bites could deter future biting. A pediatrician on a morning talk show suggested a spray of Chloraseptic on the child’s tongue to do the trick. Some parents use a spicy substance. The point is that it doesn’t taste good, but it will cause the child no harm. (Always check with your child’s pediatrician before trying these suggestions.)

Most parents and caregivers experience great frustration when they try to stop biting behavior. It’s important to try several methods to stop this behavior, and it is equally important to remember that this behavior will, eventually, pass.

