

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 reasons for biting is the first step to preventing or changing this 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 young 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!

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! At this age, they don't fully understand that a bite hurts. It is the reaction that gets their interest.

Attention

Older toddlers may bite to get attention. When children 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.

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.

Strong Emotions

Young children have wide range of emotions from great excitement to

extreme 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 or emotions yet. A loving pat sometimes turns into a push or a whack. A kiss sometimes turns into a bite. Some children bite when they are very excited. Others bite instinctively when they feel threatened, anxious or frustrated.

Lack of language skills.

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.

Days filled with too much and too little ...

A child's world can be stressful at times. Too much noise, too much waiting, too many toys and too many children can simply be overwhelming. "Too little" can be a problem too. A lack of daily routine, interesting things to do, or very little adult attention can create stressful situations for children. Big changes like a divorce, a new baby, or a move to a new home also cause stress for children. Biting is one way to express feelings and relieve tension.

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 was the child experiencing? <i>(Hungry, Sleepy, Excited, Overwhelmed?)</i>			
What happened after?			
How was the situation handled?			
Why do you think the biting might be happening? <i>(You may want to review ideas in this publication.)</i>			

What will be your plan of action?

Prevention ideas _____

Teaching new behavior _____



Use the who, what, when, where, and how method to discover what is really happening



WHAT YOU 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 is the child experiencing? What happens before or afterward? How was the situation handled?

Focus on Prevention

Create a supportive environment.

The places we spend our time in each day have a profound impact on our daily comfort and experiences. Create spaces for children that are not overly stimulating. Reduce noise, harsh lights, and cold, hard surfaces. Emphasize neutral calming colors.

Recognize normal development.

Infants often bite instinctively and may not understand the difference between biting a person or an object. When biting occurs as the result of exploration or teething, provide the child with a cold wet cloth or teething ring to gnaw on. Toddlers are very focused on learning how to walk, run and move their body. They push, pull, yank, give sloppy kisses and yes, sometimes bite. The ability to share and take turns is just beyond their level of understanding. When two toddlers fight over a favorite toy, you may want to provide additional favorite toys.

Support basic needs and yes, timing is everything. You can help to reduce challenging behaviors by providing meals or nap times before children become overly hungry or tired and cranky. You may also want to consider if a child is getting enough sleep or nourishment.

Emphasize positive attention. If attention seems to be the main cause for biting, try to look for more positive things to do. 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.

Stay close and observe. Close observation can give you clues and an opportunity to step in quickly to prevent biting situations. Observe both the biter and also children who have a tendency to be bitten. Sometimes a biting is unintentionally provoked. Both children may need your help to develop more positive responses.

Model and teach helpful words. Biting usually decreases as children begin to master language skills. Words are magical in the way they help us to express our thoughts and feelings and give us control over our world. You can teach a child helpful words to use in frustrating situations. For example, you might say, "Abby,

you can tell Ethan with your words that you need him to move instead of biting him. Say "Move, Ethan." Learning how to say, "No, Stop," and other simple phrases is a first step to learning how to get along with others.

Reduce stress. Make life as supportive and normal as possible. Regular routines and predictable mealtimes and naptimes are reassuring. More time with a caring adult can help. Many favorite activities can actually relieve tension. Examples are rolling, squishing, and pounding play dough. Sand and water play can also be very soothing and calming.

Be consistent and patient. Remember that it takes time to change challenging behaviors, especially if they are linked to a major event like a move or a new baby at home.



WHEN BITING STRIKES - TAKE QUICK ACTION

Say “No Biting, Biting Hurts!”

When a child bites, use your voice and facial expressions to show that biting is unacceptable. Speak firmly, but calmly and look directly into the child’s eyes. For example, you might say “Abby, No, biting. Biting hurts!” “Ethan is crying. If you need to bite, you can bite this (cloth, toy, food, etc.), but I won’t let you bite Ethan or any another child.”

Shift and redirect the action.

Separate and remove the biting child to another closely supervised location or space. If the child is upset, allow time to calm down and then talk to the toddler about his

or her behavior. Redirect the child to another activity and continue to closely supervise.

Protect and comfort the child who was bitten.

Focus your primary attention on the victim. Comfort the child. Apply first aid and an ice pack, if necessary.

Teach nurturing and caring behaviors.

It is generally best to separate the biter and the child who was bitten for the short term, but it may sometimes be appropriate for older toddlers to help comfort the victim by bringing a favorite toy or blanket. This is a good way to teach nurturing behavior.

RESOURCES

Visit the Extension Store, store.extension.iastate.edu, for free resources about children, families. Search for the following by title:

Ages and Stages series (PM 1530A-I)

- specific development milestones for children ages birth through 11 years old.

Understanding Children series

- Children and Sleep (PM 1529O)
- Disciplining Your Preschooler (PM 1529B)
- Disciplining Your Toddler (PM 1529C)
- Fears (PM 1529D)
- Language Development (PM 1529F)
- Learning to Read and Write (PM 1529E)
- Moving to a New Home (PM 1529G)
- Self-Esteem (PM 1529H)
- Sibling Rivalry (PM 1529I)
- Temper Tantrums (PM 1529J)
- Toilet Training (PM 1529K)
- Toys (PM 1529M)

Occasionally in desperation, an adult will attempt to bite a child back in punishment. Not only is this practice considered to be harmful and abusive, but it is confusing to the child. Rather than stopping the biting, it teaches the child that biting is okay. It is never acceptable for an adult to bite a child.



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Understanding Children - Biting is available online at: store.extension.iastate.edu/product/5006.

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