Toddler Biting

1 Why do toddlers bite?

Biting is a normal and very typical behavior for toddlers. Toddlers may bite because they:

- lack the language they need to express important needs or strong feelings like anger, frustration, joy, worry, etc.
- are overwhelmed by the sounds, light, touch, or activity level
- are experimenting to see what will happen (curious)
- want your attention
- are over-tired
- are bored or need more active playtime
- are teething, or have a need for oral stimulation, or both

Be a detective. Watch your child to see what is happening immediately prior to a bite. Does your child seem to get very overwhelmed on the playground, with lots of other children shouting and brushing past her? Or does your child tend to bite when she is at her frustration limit, after her block tower has fallen? It’s also important to be self-aware of how you respond to biting. By making a big deal out of biting, adults sometimes encourage it because children learn that biting leads to lots of attention!

Knowing why your child is biting is the first step to responding. If you’re struggling with this behavior, your HealthySteps Specialist, an early educator, child care provider, health care provider, or early interventionist can help you. Keep in mind that, for most toddlers, biting is a phase which passes as they develop more language, better self-regulation, and more mature social skills.

Strategies to prevent biting:

- Distract your child with a toy or book. Suggest looking out the window or take a walk to another room or outside. The goal is to reduce the tension and shift your child’s attention.
- Suggest how your child might handle the situation. You could say, “Marcus, you can tell Ana: ‘You are a too close. Don’t touch my hair.’” If you think your child might be biting due to a need for oral stimulation, offer your child something he can safely bite and chew—a cracker, some carrot sticks, or a teether.
- Suggest ways to share. Take out a kitchen timer to give children a visual reminder of how long they can each play with a toy. Problems with sharing is one of the most common triggers for biting.
- Reading books about biting can also help. As you read, ask your child how the different characters might be feeling.

2 What should I do when my toddler bites?

First, keep your own feelings in check. When a toddler bites, you might feel frustrated, annoyed, embarrassed, worried, or a combination of these. All of these feelings are normal, but responding when you are upset is usually not a good idea. So take a moment to calm yourself—count to 10, take a deep breath, or do whatever works for you.
Let your child know that biting is not OK. In a serious, firm voice (but not angry or yelling), say: “No biting. Biting hurts.”

Focus your attention on the child who was bitten. Ensure that the child who was bitten is comforted, safe, and secure. Comment on how that child might be feeling: “Joaquin, I know you are feeling surprised/sad/scared because Madison bit you. It hurts when you get bitten. I am looking at it and you will be okay. Would you like some ice?” Keep it short, simple, and clear. Help the child who was hurt to return to play. Avoid shaming the child who bit.

Take a moment to reflect on the incident with the child who bit. Narrate what happened and offer the child an acceptable way to express strong feelings. You could say: “You bit right after Joaquin took your toy. You might have been feeling angry at him. When you are angry you can bang on this drum or stomp your feet.”

Help the child who bit to join peers in play once again. Offer two choices of activities that the child might like to join (the activities offered should not be a “punishment”).

It might help to suggest activities, such as active play, art, or music activities, that allow children to release energy in constructive ways. The toddler who bit and the child who was hurt should not be made to play with one another, unless they want to.

What absolutely WILL NOT work to stop biting?

- Shaming or harsh punishment do not reduce biting, but they do increase your child’s fear and worry—which can actually increase biting incidents.
- Biting your child back, which some might suggest, is not a useful response. There is no research to show this behavior reduces biting. However, it does teach your child that it’s okay to bite people when you are upset! Keep in mind that human bites can be dangerous, and biting constitutes child abuse. This is not an appropriate response to toddler biting.

Remember, learning a new behavior takes time. Your toddler may bite again, so continue watching playtime closely. It also helps to use the same words (“No biting. Biting hurts”) as consistently as possible to emphasize the message. Biting that doesn’t get better should be evaluated by an infant mental health professional, as it can be associated with other difficulties such as emotional regulation, emotional issues, or more severe disruptive behavior problems. Talk to your HealthySteps Specialist about local resources who can provide support.