

# Ouch! When Children Bite

*What to do and  
How to help*



**FAMILY  
RESOURCE  
CENTER**



## Why do children bite?

Biting is a typical behavior experienced in early childhood for a variety of reasons, but is usually outgrown over time. Due to the developmental capacities of infants, toddlers, and preschoolers, they may use biting as a way of communicating a need or coping with a challenge.

### Reasons Behind the Bite

*Children may bite in order to:*

- Relieve pain from teething
- Satisfy a need for oral stimulation
- Communicate anger, fear, anxiety, or frustration (“I want that toy!” or “You’re in my space”)
- Cope with being over stimulated by the environment (too loud, too crowded)
- Communicate a physiological need like fatigue or hunger
- Act in self defense
- Imitate seeing someone else biting and experience the cause and effect
- Explore what something feels or tastes like in the mouth
- Demonstrate needing more active playtime

### How to Respond to Biting

*Infants*

Infants explore their world with hands, eyes, and mouth, learning when they should and should not bite. If your infant takes a bite on mom’s shoulder or brother’s finger, calmly use clear signals to indicate biting is not to be done to people by saying “no biting”.

*Toddlers & Preschoolers*

Quickly and calmly get down to the child’s level and try to understand why the bite occurred then talk about it using emotional language, asking and describing how they felt: “You were feeling [angry, frustrated, scared] and you bit your sister. It hurts your sister when you bite her. No biting.”

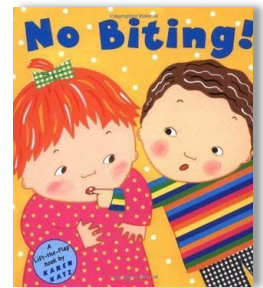
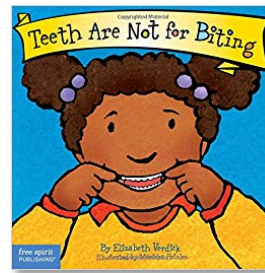
Shift the attention towards the child that was bitten to provide first-aid if necessary and demonstrate empathy. Excessive attention towards the biting toddler may reinforce the negative behavior. Later discuss how the child can more positively respond to similar situations in the future.

## Tips & Strategies to Prevent Biting

- ❖ Anticipate when a bite may occur by considering what happens before your child bites and whom they're around. Watch for signals that indicate a bite may soon occur.
- ❖ Offer your child appropriate items to bite to relieve oral stimulation like teethingers.
- ❖ Provide a stress-free environment for your child with items like play dough or bubbles while in large enough play areas with consistent routines.
- ❖ Do not shame your child for biting or bite them back. This sends the message that violence is an acceptable behavior.
- ❖ Support language development and acknowledge your child's emotions by helping them express with words and appropriate peer interactions.
- ❖ Read books with your child about biting:

Heinlen, M. (2003). *Teeth are not for Biting*. Minneapolis, MN: Free Spirit Publishing.  
Katz, K. (2002). *No Biting*. New York, NY: Grosset and Dunlap.

*Remember,  
learning a new  
behavior takes  
time.*



## What if the biting continues or worsens?

If you are concerned about biting behavior that has not changed over time with positive guidance, you may want to consider seeking support from a professional and meeting with your child's teachers or care providers.

Discussing possible reasons for the biting and devising a plan on how to address it consistently at home and in school/child care will help your child change their behavior more effectively. This does take patience, as it can take several weeks to change behaviors.

Professionals who can help address biting and advise strategies to help include your pediatrician, a child therapist, or a child development specialist. Over time, your child will learn not to bite and how to appropriately express their needs.

### We're here for you!

The **Family Resource Center** is part of the Family and Child Life program and Department of Family and Consumer Sciences at Central Washington University.

Our mission is to improve the lives of families in the University and broader Kittitas County community by providing programming to support families, coordinating family-related research, and providing civic engagement opportunities for students.

For more information, visit: <https://www.cwu.edu/family/>

*Be sure to check out all the pages in our child development resource series!*

This page was developed from the following references:

- The Center on Social and Emotional Foundations for Early Learning (CSEFEL). "Responding to Your Child's Bite." [www.vanderbilt.edu/csefel/documents/biting-parenting\\_tool.pdf](http://www.vanderbilt.edu/csefel/documents/biting-parenting_tool.pdf)
- The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC). "Understanding and Responding to Children Who Bite." <https://www.naeyc.org/our-work/families/understanding-and-responding-children-who-bite>
- University of Maine Center for Community Inclusion and Disability Studies. "Ouch! That hurts! – Biting." (Growing ideas tip sheet). <http://umaine.edu/ccids/files/2009/12/biting120309.pdf>
- Zero to Three. "Why Do Toddlers Bite? Finding the Right Response." [www.zerotothree.org/child-development/challenging-behavior/chew-on-this-resources-on-biting.html](http://www.zerotothree.org/child-development/challenging-behavior/chew-on-this-resources-on-biting.html)
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