



How to Help Your Child Stop Biting

Brooke Brogle, Alyson Jiron & Jill Giacomini

It is very common for a child to bite others at some point during their early years. When children do not have the skills or vocabulary to express their feelings, they might engage in a behavior, such as biting, as a way to let you know how they feel. Children might bite for a variety of reasons:

- **Frustration** – she might bite because she wants her toy back or because her sister is sitting too close to her.
- **Lack of play skills** – she might bite because she feels overwhelmed by the proximity of other children or expectation to share toys.
- **Attention** – she might bite because biting causes a big reaction from adults. Biting can result in adults interacting with the child or gaining the adult's attention.
- **Teething** – she might bite to relieve pain from new teeth coming in.
- **Overwhelming emotions** – she might bite because she does not know how to express emotions when she is hungry, tired, scared or anxious.

The important thing for you to remember when biting occurs is to stay calm with your actions and words and first try to figure out the reason WHY the biting happened. For example, if your child bites you when your attention is focused on another person in the room, you might think your child bit you to get your attention. Once you understand the reasons why your child bites, you can teach her a new way to express her feelings or requests during situations when she is likely to bite. It takes time, patience and repeated practice, but once she has mastered the skills needed to appropriately express her feelings, biting and other challenging behaviors will decrease.

Try This at Home

- If your child is biting out of frustration, you can say, "You are so frustrated. You want that toy." Teach your child simple words such as "mine" or "no." Teach some basic sign language or gestures for things like "help" or "stop."
- If your child is biting because she lacks play skills, join her in play by sitting on the floor and coaching her. She might need guidance to learn and practice how to join play, take turns, share, communicate with other children, and get help if she needs it. For example, if another child tries to take her doll, you might say, "Molly thinks your doll looks fun. She wants to play too. Can we show Molly where the other dolls are?"
- If your child is biting to get attention, keep your reaction non-emotional, short, and as uninteresting

as possible to avoid teaching him that biting has a big effect on the adult. An adult's big reaction can be reinforcing for the child. Instead, teach your child appropriate ways that he can get attention, such as tapping you on the shoulder, and then reward him when that behavior occurs. For more information on how to teach this skill, refer to the Backpack Connection handout "How to Teach Your Child to Appropriately Get Your Attention".

- If your child is biting because he is teething, offer crunchy healthy foods such as crackers or pretzels throughout the day. Give him a teething ring or cloth to chew on. Chilled teethingers can also soothe sore gums.
- If he is biting at times when he feels overwhelmed by anger, frustration or disappointment, you can teach him about emotions and ways to deal with them in order to reduce, or eliminate, the biting behavior. You can use books about emotional literacy as teaching tools. You can also help him to identify and label his own emotions or others emotions as they are being experienced. For more information on teaching your child about emotions, refer to the Backpack Connection handout "How to Help Your Child Understand and Label Emotions".

Practice at School

When a child bites at school, teachers immediately help the child who has been hurt. By first attending to the hurt child, teachers are not giving attention to the child who bit. This lets the child who bit know that if she wants to get someone's attention, this way did not work. Teachers also include the child who bit in caring for the hurt child as much as possible. This may include letting her get an ice pack, carry a bandage, offer a hug, hold his hand or bring him a stuffed animal. By including her, she is seeing the result of her actions, learning how to solve problems and help friends. After the situation has calmed down, teachers might talk about what happened and offer ideas on what she can do the next time she feels like biting. Teachers might also put books in the library about biting to read.

The Bottom Line

Biting is a common behavior for very young children, but one that must be addressed immediately. Children might bite when they feel overwhelmed by an emotion and do not have the words or skills to tell someone or ask for help. Parents can watch and learn when their child is likely to bite (during play dates with friends, when left alone with a sibling, when teething, etc.) and then teach their child a new skill to replace the biting behavior.

Backpack Connection Series

About this Series

The Backpack Connection Series was created by TACSEI to provide a way for teachers and parents/caregivers to work together to help young children develop social emotional skills and reduce challenging behavior. Teachers may choose to send a handout home in each child's backpack when a new strategy or skill is introduced to the class. Each Backpack Connection handout provides information that helps parents stay informed about what their child is learning at school and specific ideas on how to use the strategy or skill at home.

The Pyramid Model

 The Pyramid Model is a framework that provides programs with guidance on how to promote social emotional competence in all children and design effective interventions that support young children who might have persistent challenging behavior. It also provides practices to ensure that children with social emotional delays receive intentional teaching. Programs that implement the Pyramid Model are eager to work together with families to meet every child's individualized learning and support needs. To learn more about the Pyramid Model, please visit ChallengingBehavior.org.

More Information

More information and resources on this and other topics are available on our website, ChallengingBehavior.org.



ChallengingBehavior.org



Reproduction of this document is encouraged. Permission to copy is not required.

This publication was produced by the Technical Assistance Center on Social Emotional Intervention (TACSEI) for Young Children funded by the Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP), U.S. Department of Education (H326B070002) and updated by the National Center for Pyramid Model Innovations also funded by OSEP (H326B170003). The views expressed do not necessarily represent the positions or policies of the Department of Education, July 2013/January, 2018.

