

GROWING IDEAS

OUCH! That hurts! — Biting

Why do some children bite?

Children bite for a variety of reasons. Biting behavior provides clues to how children are feeling, their stage of development and what they need from their environment to be successful. Understanding what the young child needs is the first step in developing an effective response. For some children, biting may be related to their stage of development. Biting can be very common, for example, at the toddler stage. When young children lack skills and strategies to communicate their feelings and needs effectively, they may feel overwhelmed. Biting then becomes a child's way of expressing frustration.



Young children communicate what is happening to them as they grow:

- Infants may be telling us that their mouths hurt from teething.
- Toddlers may be telling us that they need to be in a space that encourages them to move around, explore, and learn about their environment.
- Preschoolers may be telling us that they have seen or experienced biting and want to try it out.

Biting can occur as a result of environmental conditions:

- Crowded, noisy, bright, or overstimulating environments may confuse or over-excite young children.
- Child/adult ratios that do not allow for close supervision can be unsafe and stressful.
- Learning materials, activities, and adult expectations that do not match children's abilities, learning style or temperament may frustrate young children.
- Changes in the environment or routines that are not sensitive to young children's needs can be upsetting.
- Schedules that do not match children's needs may cause anxiety or boredom.

Create environments that match children's individual developmental needs and interests. For example:

- Arrange the space to fit the activity and group size.
- Create quiet or alone space for rest and relaxation.
- Offer activities that include movement and offer sensory experiences (sand, water, etc).
- Purchase multiples of favorite toys to reduce frustration.
- Provide a daily schedule and routine that is consistent, but flexible.
- Limit the number of transitions and provide cues and supports to prepare children for changes.



What is a child trying to communicate through biting?

Powerful emotions are difficult for young children to manage and express. These emotions may include the following:

- Anger
- Frustration
- Excitement
- Fear
- Anxiety
- Confusion

Preventing and responding to biting behavior:

When care and education professionals and parents understand what children are trying to communicate, they increase the chances of preventing and appropriately responding to biting behavior. For example:

- Provide teething toys to relieve teething pains.
- Provide opportunities to move and explore independently, and to make choices.
- Allow a child to eat when hungry, sleep when tired, sit on your lap, or have enough time to finish an activity.
- Acknowledge children's frustration and give them the words to express their feelings: "You're angry because you want the truck." Offer a solution, "I see another blue truck, let's go get it."
- Model the appropriate words to ask for something: "Ask Camden, 'Can I use the truck?'"
- Provide consistent, nurturing relationships with responsive adults.
- Recognize when children are unable to manage a situation on their own and intervene in a calm and caring manner. Identify opportunities for teaching conflict resolution skills.

Biting behavior is stressful to adults too.

Reassure staff and families who express concerns about biting behavior that there is a thoughtful plan to address the behavior, remembering not to disclose confidential information. Educators can support families by:

- Providing information about child development.
- Sharing a copy of this tipsheet.
- Validating concerns.
- Discussing and modeling methods for preventing and responding to biting behavior.
- Working together on a consistent approach.

If biting continues and does not decrease over time, professional help may be needed. In some limited situations, care and education professionals may need to talk with the child's parents and suggest that they check with their pediatrician or look into a child development screening to rule out other underlying health or developmental issues.

Where to learn more:

See "[OUCH! That hurts! — Biting — Selected Resources](http://www.ccids.umaine.edu/resources/ec-growingideas/bitingres/)" online at: <http://www.ccids.umaine.edu/resources/ec-growingideas/bitingres/>

See "[OUCH! That hurts! — Biting — Virtual Toolkit](http://www.ccids.umaine.edu/resources/ec-growingideas/bitingvtk/)" online at: <http://www.ccids.umaine.edu/resources/ec-growingideas/bitingvtk/>



This update and expansion of the Growing Ideas Resources for Guiding Early Childhood Practices was completed by the University of Maine Center for Community Inclusion and Disability Studies with funding from the Maine Department of Health and Human Services' Office of Child and Family Services, Early Childhood Division. © 2011

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Updated: 02/27/14