Biting

Not all young children bite, but, anecdotally, experts say up to a quarter of all children will do so at some stage – mostly between the ages of two and three. It is a phase that does pass – by four, most children have grown out of it. Some try the odd nip and move on, others grow into serial biters. It doesn't mean the child is a monster – many children who bite are otherwise gentle and sociable.

Why do they bite?

Understanding why a child bites is key to beating the problem. Not all children bite out of anger or to hurt another child – in fact young toddlers can't really understand how much pain they're causing. Ask yourself what the child is achieving by biting and think about what the reward is for him or her – does he get a huge amount of attention when he bites?

Experts advise trying to see biting as a way of communicating rather than just bad behaviour – once you do that you have more choices in how to respond.

- **Expressing emotion:** Oddly enough, young toddlers can bite as a way of showing love. Toddlers have really intense feelings but don't know how to show them. Biting can be a way of expressing their feelings – often it's mum being bitten!
- **Experimenting:** Toddlers are learning how their body works – they put things in their mouths, and sometimes nip. It's impulsive and they don't mean to hurt. Often, a baby will bite on someone when they're teething. Sometimes toddlers nip when they're over-excited.
- **Defending:** Young children learn to bite as a defence, especially if they can't talk. Sometimes a child will bite others when they feel anxious or threatened. Sometimes changes or upsets at home can bring on this type of biting. These children are trying to establish a safety zone. When they bite, their victim moves away – it's a great defence.
- **Controlling:** Some children know biting is a way of getting other children – or their parents – to do what they want.

  They don't always do this consciously. It may happen when a group of children are jostling to be leader. Sometimes the youngest child in the

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family bites to gain power. And as any child who's ever tried it has learnt, biting is a fantastic way of getting attention – and so what if it's negative?

- **Frustrated or irritated**: Your child wants a toy back. Or they want a biscuit or adult attention, or can't cope with a situation. They may not understand turn-taking and sharing. Or things may have changed at home or the child feels under stress. Your child doesn't necessarily mean to cause harm, but just can't find the words to express himself.

How to stop it

Look at who they bite, when they bite and in what situations. And a tailor-made response will be more effective than a "one-size-fits-all" solution.

In all instances, react swiftly, and keep your cool. Don't ever – ever – bite back or hit – retaliation could be dangerous. But don't dodge the issue either - children need to know immediately that what they have done is wrong.

- **Intervene**: Open your eyes – look at how intense, how frequent bites are and what the triggers are. One of the best ways is to act before the child has a chance to sink their teeth into anyone. Move the child away from the person they're about to bite. Or don't put them into large groups (for a short time) if that's where it happens. Plan in advance for their behaviour. Children often clench their teeth before they bite – an unmistakable sign. Take the child somewhere quiet to calm down. If a teething child is trying out his or her teeth, find toys he can safely chew on.
- **Teach them it's wrong**: When the child bites, use simple but firm words. Try, "that's biting, that's wrong" or a firm "no". If you're in a group, remove them from the situation. Say briefly that it hurts others and why you don't like them doing it.
- **Teach them to express themselves**: When things have calmed down, try to help the child find a less painful way to express their feelings. This works well with children who are biting to try to show their affection. If the child is expressing affection, teach them to hug rather than bite whenever they feel strong emotions. Likewise, if the child bites out of defence, show them how to tell somebody they don't want him or her too close – to make the "stop" sign (a hand held up) – or even gently to touch the other child's shoulder – which won't hurt but gives a clear message. Or teach them to come and find you instead if they're angry.

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- **Reduce the effectiveness:** When children bite to gain attention, dealing with it is trickier. After the first big talking to, don't try to continue to reason or explain. Give a firm "no". Put your body between victim and biter and turn your back on the biter. Give the victim sympathy and the biter a clear message that this is an unproductive way of getting attention.

- If time-out is one of your methods, now's the time to use it. If the bite was over a toy or treat, remove it for a short while

- **Praise them for good behaviour:** Catch the child behaving well – not biting others, playing well in groups, not biting to get his or her way – and be generous with praise. Be specific – "good boy" becomes like water off a duck's back to him. Instead try: "how well you're playing" or "aren't you kind and gentle to your friend?".

When nothing works

There are a number of reasons methods may not work – there may be something getting in the way of the child learning – perhaps anxiety. Some children learn at different speeds and won't pick up on things straight away – you might just need to be more persistent.

- **Stick with it:** Keeping to a plan of action is more difficult than it seems. You need attention, energy, consistency and support. These methods aren't rocket science, but need planning and determination Make sure everyone involved with the child is consistent – young children find it hard when they receive mixed messages
- **Give clear commands and be positive:** Try not to raise your voice and speak in a firm voice. Don't overdo explanations: "The first bite may be impulsive, but a child can soon learn that they get an enormous amount of attention. If they continue to bite, don't go into why it's wrong, just say 'that's biting, that's wrong'."

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