

Toddler Biting

WHY DO TODDLERS BITE?

Biting is a typical behavior for toddlers. They 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.
- Want your attention.
- Are overtired.
- Are bored or need more active playtime.
- Are teething, have a need for oral stimulation, or both.



Knowing *why* your child is biting is the first step to curbing the behavior. Be a detective. Watch to see what is happening immediately prior to a bite. Does your child get overwhelmed on the playground? Or do they tend to bite when they are at their frustration limit? Keep in mind that biting is a phase that passes for most toddlers. They won't bite as much as they mature and gain new language and self-regulation skills.

STRATEGIES TO PREVENT BITING:

- **Stay close and interrupt any biting you see.** Stopping a child from biting is the most effective strategy. If you see it coming, place your hand in front of your child's mouth to stop them from biting.
- **Offer support with sharing.** Use a kitchen timer to give children a visual reminder of how long they can each play with a toy. A problem with sharing is one of the most common triggers for biting.
- **Stay consistent with your response.** If your child bites you, say and do the same thing every time. For example, put them down and say, "No biting. Biting hurts."

- **Read books about biting.** *Good Biting, Bad Biting* by Sally Haas and *No Biting!* by Karen Katz are two good examples. As you read, ask your child how the different characters might be feeling.

WHAT TO DO WHEN YOUR TODDLER BITES?

- **Keep your own feelings in check.** When toddlers bite you may feel frustrated, annoyed, embarrassed, or worried. All these feelings are normal but responding when you are upset is not helpful. Take a moment to calm yourself. Count to 10, take a deep breath, or do whatever works for you. Find more tips in our *Temper Tantrums* and *Limit Setting* articles.
- **Focus your attention on the child who was bitten.** Make sure the child who was bitten is comforted, safe, and secure. Comment on how they might be feeling: "Joaquin, are you OK? Biting really hurts. It looks OK, would you like some ice?" Keep it short, simple, and clear. Help the child who was hurt return to play. Avoid shaming the child who bit.
- **Let your child know that biting is not OK.** Use a serious, firm voice to deliver your "no biting" message. But try not to yell.
- **Take a moment to reflect on the incident.** Narrate what happened. You could say, "You bit Joaquin when he took your toy. Next time you can tell him you want the toy back or I can help you."
- **Allow some space if needed.** The toddler who bit and the child who was hurt should not be made to play with one another right away unless they want to.
- **Offer your child something he can safely bite and chew.** This may help if you think your child is biting due to a need for oral stimulation.
- **Help everyone move on.** Be aware of how you respond. If you make a big deal out of biting, it can encourage some children to bite just to get your attention. They learn that biting gets lots of attention!

WHAT WILL NOT WORK TO STOP BITING?

- **Shaming and harsh punishment do not reduce biting.** They can increase your child's fear and worry—which can make them bite even more.

SCAN FOR MORE INFO



- **Biting your child back is not helpful.** There is no research to show it reduces biting. Biting a child teaches that it's OK to bite people when you are upset! Keep in mind that human bites can be dangerous, and biting constitutes child abuse. If biting doesn't get better, have an infant mental health professional evaluate it. (It might be associated with other issues.) If you are frustrated with your child's behavior, ask your HealthySteps Specialist for resources and support.