

# WHEN A CHILD BITES

UNDERSTANDING WHY AND WHAT TO DO

For additional CHS Family Education Program materials, please call (714) 712-7888. For more information about CHS Early Learning and Education Programs, call (888) CHS-4KIDS.

Family Education Program materials and podcasts, and information on CHS programs can also be found on our website at [www.chs-ca.org](http://www.chs-ca.org).



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When a child bites or is bitten, a strong emotional response is sure to follow. Children and adults alike may experience overwhelming feelings of fear, anger, frustration, and guilt. Biting behavior affects the health and safety of children, and can lead to children feeling unsafe. Understanding why children bite, and learning how to handle and prevent biting behaviors, will create a healthy and positive environment for children.





★ **CHILDREN MAY BITE FOR A VARIETY OF REASONS** ★

REASON	SOLUTION
<p><b>TEETHING</b> When gums are sore and swollen, biting can feel good.</p>	Offer the child a teething biscuit, a firm rubber teething ring, or a frozen bagel.
<p><b>ATTENTION</b> Young children may try a variety of ways to gain attention, including biting.</p>	Give children attention when they are behaving appropriately and respond promptly when they ask questions or call out.
<p><b>CONTROL</b> Children may use biting as a way to get something they want, such as a toy someone else is using. If biting gets them what they want, they are more likely to repeat the behavior.</p>	Model how to ask for things politely, and explain that sometimes we have to wait. Label the child's feelings and offer comfort. "Waiting is difficult to do and I can see you feel sad. Can I help you find a different toy while we wait?"

<p><b>DEFENSE</b> Children may bite when feeling threatened as a way to protect themselves and their play space, toys, or food.</p>	Make sure there are enough toys for all children and that they have plenty of room to play. Put space between children when they are eating meals. Comfort a child if they receive a bite, offer the child who bit a teether, and describe what happened. "Your friend is crying because biting hurts. We are gentle with each other (stroke your own arm) and we only bite teethers or food."
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<p><b>LIFE CHANGES</b> A move, divorce, new sibling, or other life change can cause feelings of frustration and stress that may lead to biting.</p>	Talk with children about life changes and label emotions so they can learn the words they need to express themselves. Reassure children that they are safe and observe them for signs of stress.
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- ★ **ACTIONS TO TAKE**
- When a child bites, adults need to intervene quickly, calmly, and firmly. Using a calm tone of voice and minimal body movement encourages children to calm themselves. Reassure both children that you are there to help.
  - If possible, keep both children with you as you inspect and wash the bitten area with warm, soapy water. This helps children understand the cause and effect of biting. Talk with both children about what happened. Label their emotions, ask them to name things that are acceptable to bite, and remind them that they can always ask an adult for help.
  - Demonstrate that gentleness and kindness are expected. Stroke your own arm to demonstrate gentle touching and invite children to practice gentle touches on their own arms or on stuffed animals.
  - Assess the situation that led to the biting incident to see if changing something in the environment or daily schedule can prevent future occurrences.
  - Teach children alternative methods for expressing themselves with language or body signals. Model words and phrases they can use to ask for a turn with a toy such as, "Can I have that next?" Suggest acceptable ways to express strong emotions such as stomping feet, pounding clay, or drawing a picture.
  - Provide activities that involve physical movement daily so that children have an outlet for their energy. This can include playing with playdough, kicking balls outside, running, jumping, dancing, etc.
  - Teach children how to use deep breathing to feel calm. They can pretend to smell a bowl of soup, and then blow on the soup. This teaches them how to breathe in through their nose and out through their mouth.

- ★ **WAYS TO PREVENT BITING**
- Evaluate the children's environment to make sure there is ample space, equipment, and toys to keep all children occupied and to minimize the need to wait for turns or share.
  - Avoid overstimulation when children show signs of stress or frustration. If possible, move play activities outside, or keep groups small and plan fewer challenging activities.
  - Increase adult supervision to intervene before frustration levels rise.
  - Teach cooperation throughout the day, demonstrating words and phrases children can use to express their desires and feelings.
  - Familiarize yourself with each child's signals for indicating a need or a strong emotion.
  - Be aware of the child's current situation. Does a parent have a new job or exams at school? Is there a loss or an addition to the family? This communication between parents and caregivers can help support children who are working through challenging situations and strong emotions.



**Biting is never acceptable for anyone.**

**WHY DO CHILDREN BITE?**  
Biting is a normal part of a young child's development. Most of the time biting occurs among toddlers and preschoolers who have limited language skills or ways to express their feelings. Pressures to keep pace with a hurried adult world can be very stressful for young children and may cause them to react physically when they feel overwhelmed. Children often need more time than adults allow to move from one activity or setting to another: home to child care, dinnertime to bedtime. Also, intense play such as tickling or wrestling for an extended time can overwhelm children. In order to prevent biting, it is necessary to identify the reason why it is happening. This allows adults to prepare for situations that might lead to biting, and support children in learning how to express themselves in healthy ways.

**TO LEARN MORE**

**BOOKS FOR CHILDREN**  
**NO BITING!**  
Karen Katz  
**TEETH ARE NOT FOR BITING**  
Elizabeth Verdick, illustrated by Marielka Heinlen

**BOOKS FOR ADULTS**  
**THE BITING SOLUTION: THE EXPERT'S NO-BITING GUIDE FOR PARENTS, CAREGIVERS, AND EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATORS**  
Lisa Poelle, M.A.

**ORGANIZATIONS**  
**THE AMERICAN ACADEMY OF PEDIATRICS**  
(AAP) PARENTING WEBSITE <https://www.healthychildren.org>  
**KIDSHEALTH®** <https://kidshealth.org/>