

Working with children who bite

Why do children bite?

Although biting is not abnormal in the sense that one out of ten toddlers and two-year-olds does it, it is a disturbing and potentially harmful behaviour that parents/carers and educators must discourage from the very first episode. It is often seen as a vicious habit, but it should not be viewed any more seriously than, for example a child taking another child's toy.

Children at a very young age won't be biting anyone through a sense of malice or because they want to hurt them. They will not have this level of understanding. Young children often explore things by putting them in their mouths; biting is simply an extension of that and will not seem wrong to them. Sometimes biting can develop into a habit if a child sees it as a way of getting attention.

Types of biters

Young children may bite for different reasons and not all will respond to the same type of intervention. Identifying the kind of biter, you're dealing with will help you to develop an appropriate type of intervention.

- **The Expressing Emotion Biter:**
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. Those closest to the biter often don't understand why it's just them who get bitten
- **The Experimental Biter:**
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 bites someone when they're teething. Sometimes toddlers nip when they're over-excited.
- **The Defending Biter:**
Young children learn to bite as a defence, especially if they can't talk. They bite other children whenever they get anxious or feel threatened. Sometimes changes or upsets at home can bring on this type of biting. *"These children are trying to establish a safety zone,"* explains Mr Flower (chartered psychologist). *"When you bite, your victim moves away – it's a great defence."*
- **The Controlling Biter:**
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 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?
- **The Frustrated or Irritated Biter:**
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 themselves.

How to manage children who bite?

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

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 your child has a chance to sink their teeth into anyone. Remove the child away from the person they're about to bite. Or don't put them into large groups 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 and provide a teething ring for soothing if under 2years old.

Teach them it's wrong:

When a child bites, use simple but firm words. Try, "that's biting, that's wrong" or a firm "stop". If you're in a group, remove them from the situation. Explain 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 your 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's expressing love, 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 handheld up). Or teach them to come and find you instead if they're angry.

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 "stop". "Put your body between victim and biter and turn your back on the biter. Give the victim sympathy and the biter a clear message this is an unproductive way of getting attention. Using reflection time is one method.

Praise them for good behaviour:

Catch your child behaving well – not biting peers, 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 ducks back to them. Instead try: "look at how well you're playing" or "aren't you kind and gentle to your friends?" NEVER hit or bite back a child for biting. This communicates that violence is an appropriate way of handling your emotions. The approach should always be calm and educational. A child should not experience a reward for biting, not even the 'reward' of negative attention.

Administering 1st Aid for the child who has been bitten

- clean the wound with soap and warm water
- gently squeeze the wound so it bleeds slightly (unless it's already bleeding) – this can help reduce the risk of infection
- press a dry dressing or clean cloth firmly onto the wound to stop the bleeding if it's bleeding heavily
- after cleaning the wound, gently pat it dry and cover it with a clean dressing
- take [paracetamol](#) or [ibuprofen](#) to help ease any pain and swelling – children under 16 should not take aspirin

Get help from NHS 111 if:

You've been bitten and:

- you think there may be objects like teeth, hair or dirt in the wound
- the bite is hot or swollen (it may also be painful, red or darker than the surrounding skin, which may be harder to see on black or brown skin)
- you have a high temperature, or feel hot, cold or shivery
- fluid is leaking from the bite
- the bite smells unpleasant
- you were bitten on your hands, feet, face or head
- you were bitten by a person
- you have not had a tetanus vaccine in the last 10 years

You can call 111 or [get help from 111 online](#).

(NHS website 27th October 2025)

(EXAMPLE – CHILD AND PARENT/CARER + SETTING ACTION PLAN)

Date:

Review:

Parent's signature:

Managers signature:

Key person signature:

Strategies to be used at home and Nursery:

- Chew Buddy as distraction – on an individual basis.
- Clear instruction given “no Biting”
- Sit down near where the incident took place but away from child with 2-minute sand timer
- Set activity out for Child to access upon arrival

Date:	<u>Any Information given by parent on drop off:</u> e.g – sleep, food, any incidents at home	<u>Antecedent - What led up to the incident, what was the trigger, what was the routine and time of day.</u>	<u>Action Taken - what strategies was used for the child? How was the situation dealt with?</u>	How effective were the strategies

Parent/Carer Action plan:

Strategies to be used at home and Nursery:

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- Clear instruction given "no Biting"
- Sit down near where the incident took place but away from child with 2-minute sand timer

Date:	<u>Any Information given by parent on drop off:</u> e.g – sleep, food, any incidents at home	<u>Antecedent - What led up to the incident, what was the trigger, what was the routine and time of day.</u>	<u>Action taken - what strategies was used for the child? How was the situation dealt with?</u>	How effective were the strategies