



ZERO TO THREE
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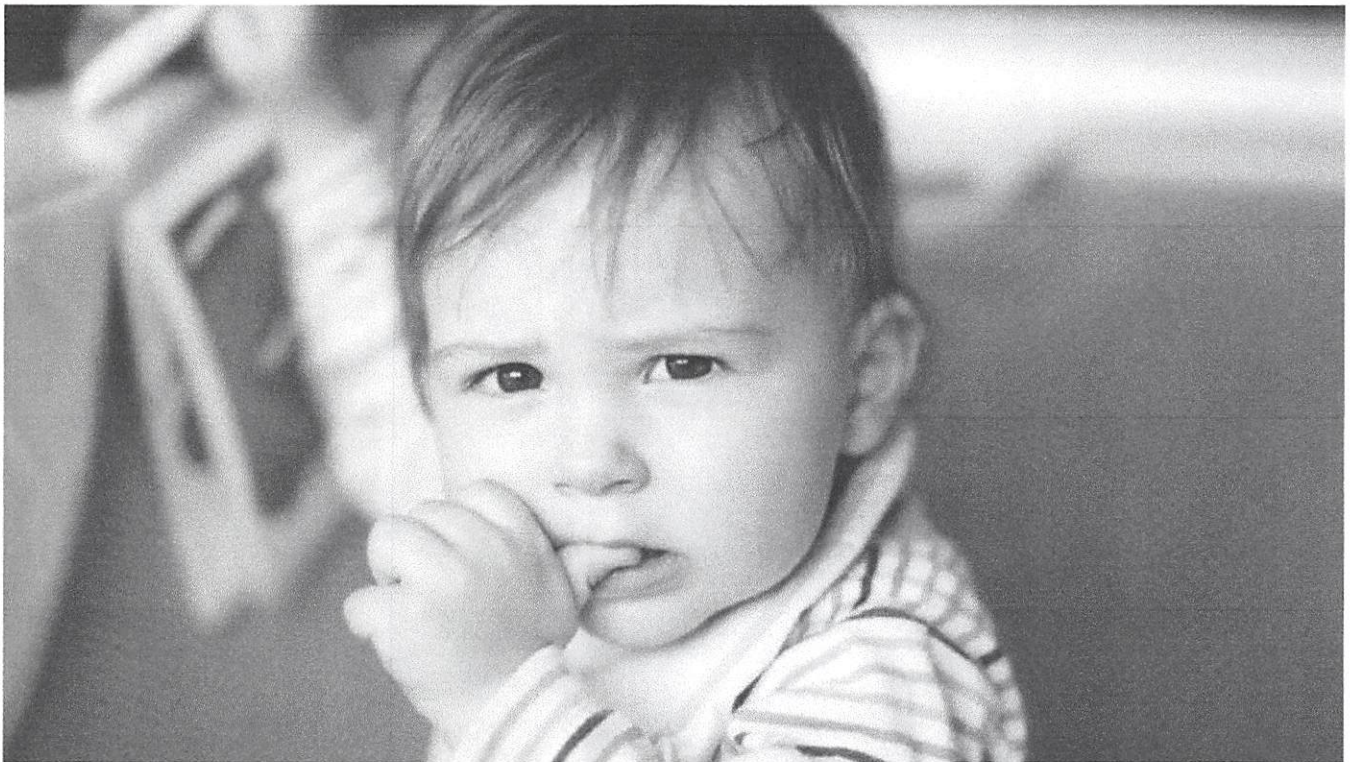
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 PARENTING RESOURCE

Toddlers and Biting: Finding the Right Response

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Trying your best to understand the underlying cause of the biting will help you develop an effective response. Children bite in order to cope with a challenge or fulfill a need.



Biting is a very common behavior among toddlers, which means there are a lot of concerned parents out there. You are not alone. The good news is that there is a lot that parents and caregivers can do to reduce and, ultimately, eliminate biting.

To set the stage for effectively addressing this challenge, avoid calling or thinking of your child as a “biter” and ask others not to use this term. Labeling children can actually lead to them taking on the identity assigned to them, which can intensify biting behavior rather than eliminate it.

Shaming and harsh punishment do not reduce biting.

Children bite in order to cope with a challenge or fulfill a need. For example, your child may be biting to express a strong feeling (like frustration), communicate a need for personal space (maybe another child is standing too close) or to satisfy a need for oral stimulation. Trying your best to understand the underlying cause of the biting will help you develop an effective response. This makes it more likely that you will be successful in eliminating the behavior.

Why do toddlers bite?

There are many reasons why toddlers might bite. Some are listed below. If you think one of these reasons might be why your child is biting, read specific strategies on how to respond later in the article. Toddlers might bite if they:

- **Lack language skills** necessary for expressing important needs or strong feelings like anger, frustration, joy, etc. Biting is a substitute for the messages he can't yet express in words like: *I am so mad at you, You are standing too close to me, I am really excited, or I want to play with you.*
- **Are overwhelmed** by the sounds, light or activity level in this setting
- **Are experimenting** to see what will happen
- **Need more active playtime**
- **Are over-tired**
- **Are teething**
- **Have an need for oral stimulation**

What Can I Do to Prevent Biting?

Questions to Consider

As you watch your child at play, you can begin to anticipate when a bite might occur. The following questions can guide you in identifying the kinds of situations often lead to biting:

1. What happened right before the bite?
2. Who was your child playing with?
3. Who was bit? Is it always the same child, or different children each time?
4. What was your child doing?
5. Where was your child?
6. Who was caring for your child?

Strategies to Prevent Biting

If you see signs that your child might be on the verge of biting, you can:

1. Distract your child with a toy or book. Suggest looking out the window or take a walk to another room or outside. The goal is to reduce the tension and shift your child's attention.

2. Suggest how your child might handle the situation that is triggering the need to bite. For example: *Marcus, you can tell Ana: "You are a little too close to me. I don't like it when you touch my hair."* If you think your child might be biting due to a need for oral stimulation, offer your child something he can safely bite and chew—a cracker, some carrot sticks, or a teether.



When parents shift their focus and energy to the child who was bitten, they clearly communicate that biting does not result in more attention. (Credit: Szeferi / Shutterstock.com)

3. Suggest ways to share. Take out a kitchen timer to give children a visual reminder of how long they can each play with a particular toy. In a group caregiving setting, you will want to make sure that the classroom has more than one of the most popular toys. Sharing is one of the most common triggers for biting.

4. Reading books about biting can also help. As you read, ask your child how the different characters might be feeling. If you have an older toddler, you can ask him to "read" the book to you, by telling you what is happening based on the pictures. Some titles to recommend include:

- *Teeth Are Not for Biting* by Elizabeth Verdick [🔗](https://www.amazon.com/Teeth-Biting-Board-Book-Behavior/dp/1575421283) (https://www.amazon.com/Teeth-Biting-Board-Book-Behavior/dp/1575421283)
- *No Biting* by Karen Katz [🔗](https://www.amazon.com/No-Biting-Karen-Katz/dp/0448455811) (https://www.amazon.com/No-Biting-Karen-Katz/dp/0448455811)
- *No Biting, Louise* by Margie Palatini [🔗](https://www.amazon.com/No-Biting-Louise-Margie-Palatini/dp/0060526289) (https://www.amazon.com/No-Biting-Louise-Margie-Palatini/dp/0060526289)

What Do I Do When My Toddler Bites?

First, keep your own feelings in check. When a toddler bites, you might feel frustrated, infuriated, annoyed, embarrassed, and/or worried. All of these feelings are normal, but responding when you are in an intense emotional state is usually not a good idea. So calm yourself before you respond—count to 10, take a deep breath, or do whatever works for you.

In a firm, matter-of-fact voice (but not angry or yelling), say: No biting. Biting hurts. Comment on how the other child is feeling: *Look, Madison is*

Making angry lion faces and growling, ripping up newspapers, punching the couch cushions, banging a drum, jumping up and down—whatever is acceptable to you.

- **Reinforce your child when he uses words to share his feelings:** *You asked me for a turn blowing bubbles instead of grabbing them. Great job. Here you go.*
- **Give your child age-appropriate choices,** for example, about what to wear or who to play with. Having choices gives children a sense of control and can reduce biting.
- **Consider a speech-language assessment** if you think your child's verbal skills might be delayed.

2. Help Your Child Cope With Feeling Overwhelmed

If your child is easily overwhelmed by lights, sound, and activity, you can:

- **Keep television and radio off** or on low volumes.
- **Avoid big crowds and high-activity settings** like the mall or the playground on a sunny Saturday morning.
- **Schedule activities with a lot of sensory input** (like clothes-shopping or trips to dentist or doctor) for your child's "best" times of day, when he is fed and well-rested.
- **Talk with your child's other caregivers** about his difficulty managing a lot of sensory input. Brainstorm ways to reduce the stimulation in his other caregiving settings.
- **Give your child a firm "bear" hug** when you sense she is feeling stressed and out of control and perhaps about to bite. This can help children feel "held together" which can be very soothing.
- **Create a "cozy corner"** in your house with pillows, books and other quiet toys like stuffed animals, or use a playtent as a safe place to take a break. Explain that this is a place your child can go if he wants to be alone or feels out of control and needs to cool down. Ensure that your child's other caregiving settings have a "cozy corner" as well.

3. Explain the Effects of Their Actions

If your child is experimenting to see what will happen when he bites, you can:

- **Provide immediate, firm, unemotional (as best you can) feedback** (No biting. Biting hurts.). Shift attention away from your child to the child who was bit.
- **Help your child understand about cause-and-effect:** *You bit Macy and now she is crying. When you bite, it hurts your friends. Biting is never okay.*

4. Provide Opportunities for Active Play

If your child needs more active play, you can:

- **Set aside time each day to be active.** Take a walk after breakfast. Turn music on while you are cooking dinner and have your child dance with you.
- **Talk with your child's other caregivers** to ensure that active play is a part of everyday. Toddlers who bite should not be punished by losing "recess" time. This may make the problem worse.
- **Build activity into your child's everyday routines**—for example, doing 10 jumping jacks before lunch or stretching before bed.

5. Address Sleep Challenges

If your child is over-tired, you can:

- **Try incrementally moving her bedtime 30 to 60 minutes earlier** over a few weeks.
- **Set up a schedule of naps** or, if she won't nap, "quiet times" when she is in her crib or bed with a book and soft music playing.
- **Avoid play-dates** or other potentially stressful activities on days when she is very tired.
- **Tell your child's other caregivers when she has not slept well** or is tired so they can shadow her, in order to reduce the possibility of a biting incident.

6. Support Healthy Teething

If your child is teething, you can:

- **Offer him a teether** or cold washcloth to bite.
- **Talk to your child's caregivers** to make sure they understand he is teething and to identify appropriate teethers in the classroom.

7. Provide Oral Stimulation

If your child has a need for oral stimulation:

- **Offer her crunchy (healthy) snacks at regular intervals** across the day. Research has found that this intervention can actually reduce biting incidents.

When to Seek Help

While biting is very common behavior, it usually stops by age 3 to 3 1/2. If your toddler continues to bite, or the number of bites increases instead of decreases over time, it is probably a good idea to request an assessment from a child development specialist.

This professional can help you identify the reason for the biting and develop a strategy for addressing the behavior. Remember, there is no quick fix. Over time, and with assistance, your child will stop biting and use more appropriate ways to express her needs.

What absolutely WILL NOT work to stop biting?

Shaming or harsh punishment do not reduce biting, but they do increase your child's fear and worry—which can actually increase biting incidents. Aggressive responses like these also do not teach your child the social skills he or she needs to cope with the situations that trigger biting.

Biting your child back, which some might suggest, is not a useful response. There is no research to show this behavior reduces biting. However, it does teach your child that it's okay to bite people when you are upset! Keep in mind that human bites can be dangerous, and biting constitutes child abuse. This is not an appropriate response to toddler biting.

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