



# First Steps

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## Ouch! Biting Hurts

Our children do not come with instructions. Parents Reaching Out provides resources that help families make informed decisions about the care and education of their children. We thank the Parent Education Network, a project of Parents Helping Parents of Wyoming, Inc. for permitting us to share their *Thoughts for Tots* in this information series.

“Biting is a normal developmental behavior for babies and toddlers, although sometimes biting is caused or intensified by other factors. Not all children do it and some do it for longer than others, but it is very common for young children to go through a phase in which they bite....Because it hurts, and because biting is socially unpopular, biting is a particularly challenging behavior for parents to deal with....babies and young toddlers don’t understand that biting hurts people.”

Source: Davis, Laura and Janis Keyser, *Becoming the Parent You Want to Be*

Age is one of the first things to consider when dealing with a child who bites others. Many toddlers under two and a half years of age bite because they do not have the socialization and verbal skills to express their needs in a more appropriate way. Preschool children may bite due to total frustration at a given situation; they often feel that their actions are justified. A school age child who bites is usually frustrated beyond control and feels very guilty about biting, but does it anyway. Regardless of the cause or the age of the child, biting cannot be tolerated. It is not okay to hurt others, and biting hurts!

### Why Do Children Bite?

Children bite because

- they are experimenting and want to know what will happen if they bite.
- they are copying the behavior of others.
- they are angry or frustrated.
- they are trying to get what they want.
- they are teething.
- they get a sense of power and control over others from biting.
- they are trying to make contact with another child but lack social skills.
- they are seeking attention.
- they feel threatened.
- they feel powerless or scared.

Many children under the age of three bite someone at least once—a parent, a sibling, or a playmate. Whenever a child bites another person, however, it is upsetting to everyone. If your child is the victim, you may feel angry; if your child is the biter, you may feel embarrassed. Biting usually declines or stops as language skills increase and children can express their feelings or needs in words instead of actions. Parents and childcare providers need to work together to reduce or eliminate biting because a child who bites is a danger to others.



## What are some strategies parents can use to prevent biting?

- Use your voice and a facial expression to show that biting is not acceptable. Speak firmly and look directly into the child's eyes and say, "No. Do not bite."
- Provide babies with objects to mouth (teething rings, frozen bagels, washcloth).
- Make sure children have plenty of opportunities to play with other children so they learn how to share and take turns.
- Recognize children's positive relationships with other children. Praise children who share, wait their turn, and treat others kindly.
- Give children lots of attention. Cuddle with them. Play or read to them—help them feel loved and safe.
- Be aware of children's feelings: watch for signs of possible conflict and growing frustration, and redirect the child's attention to prevent him/her from biting.
- Provide children with activities and toys that offer a variety of sensory-motor experiences.
- Encourage children who can talk to use words instead of biting. For example, "Tell Bill with your words that you need him to move, instead of biting him. Say, 'Please move, Bill'."
- Tell the child that if she/he is upset, to come to you for help instead of biting another child.
- Explain that biting hurts and they must not bite others.



## How should parents respond to biting?

- State clearly that it is not okay to bite.
- Take care of the child who was bitten.
- Comfort him/her, put an ice pack on the bite to prevent bruising, and clean the wound if the skin is broken.
- If possible, have the child who did the biting help care for the child who was bitten. This teaches the child to be sensitive to the feelings of others.
- Talk with the children about the cause for the biting and what the biter could have done instead of biting.
- Simplify the play situation. Some children do better with fewer children, or play well with one friend.
- Keep play sessions short. Children become tired if they play for too long, and may lose the ability to control their emotions.
- Take the time to talk to your child about biting and to teach him/her that biting is wrong and hurtful.
- Do not bite back! Biting hurts. We do not want to hurt our children. A toddler cannot understand that just because his arm hurts after having been bitten that another child's arm would hurt after he bites her.



Parents need to be alert to situations in which children may be inclined to bite other children. The inability to put feelings and needs into words, anger, tiredness, anxiety, and over-stimulation may all contribute to a child resorting to biting to express himself or herself. Parents need to look for patterns of biting and be ready to step in and redirect children to other activities, provide a quiet place to rest and settle down, hold the child who is on the verge of losing control, or simply step in and say, "No. We never bite people."

*For more information call Parents Reaching Out. We offer phone consultations and provide workshops in English or Spanish to communities throughout New Mexico. This publication was developed under a grant from the New Mexico Department of Health Family Infant Toddler program. However, the views here expressed do not necessarily represent the policy of the Department of Health and should not be assumed to be an endorsement by the New Mexico Department of Health.*