



by Karen Stephens

# Biting Among Toddlers and Twos: Responses to Try

One of the most emotionally charged issues for parents with toddlers and twos in group care is children biting. Whether your child bites others or is the one bitten, it's a roller-coaster ride of confounding frustration.

Facing our children's vulnerability — or capacity for aggression— brings out feelings of protectiveness. And it brings on a lot of guilt, too. You either feel guilty because your child is biting others or because you've put your little one in the position of getting bitten by other children. From either perspective, biting is traumatic for everyone.

Biting is shocking to adults because we rarely remember chomping a sibling or playmate during our own childhood. But biting among toddlers and twos is an age-old, common behavior. And it does pass. It may seem to take forever, but children eventually learn to control that knee-jerk impulse to bite.

As you grapple with biting issues, consider the unique developmental challenges facing children. Toddlers and twos are just *learning the ropes* of a very complex world of unpredictable social interactions. The number and variety of peer behaviors that they must learn to interpret and respond to increases greatly in a classroom setting. Most interactions are smooth sailing; some are not.

Toddlers and twos are just beginning to grasp that people have different perspectives. They are just learning about empathy. They're on the cusp of developing a conscience. As language skills gradually emerge, they're taking their first baby steps toward controlling intense emotions. Until those emerging social and verbal skills are mastered, toddlers and twos travel some bumpy roads — taking mom and dad along for the ride.

In group care, there are many peers, all with their varying moods, temperaments, and competing interests for toys and teachers. And so there are increased chances for biting. But take heart; that same peer group experience also provides children with the *teachable moments* they need to master emotional and social competence.

When we adults become *detective-like* and observe clues, we are better informed as we select prevention strategies. And we're more likely to choose responses that successfully guide children onto better self-control.

Identifying conditions and situations that contribute to biting can help parents and care professionals respond wisely, but it can be tricky. The reasons children bite varies immensely. And in truth, an exact cause is sometimes never pinned down with certainty.

We do know that by nature, toddlers and twos strive to *get what they want, when they want it*. And so they sometimes *act out* or use aggression, such as biting.

Very young children rely on non-verbal communication, rather than verbal language, to express wishes and feelings. And so it's critical to observe children's behavior and the conditions that lead to a biting incident. Observation can help us fathom children's motivations or primary goal.

Never  
emotionally  
abandon a  
child who has  
bitten by  
punishing  
with  
cold rejection,  
withholding  
love, or  
refusing to  
comfort and  
forgive.

Some children may be prone to biting when hungry, tired, overwhelmed, frustrated, or enduring teething pain. Others may bite to get an adult's undivided attention or to get a toy from a playmate. Biting is also a way for children to exert a sense of power and control.

Children sometimes bite out of exploratory curiosity or interest in textures and sensations. They are equally fascinated by cause and effect. And of course, imitation always comes into play with children's behavior, too.

Also observe to see if your child bites out of frustration or out of self defense. Reflect on stresses your child may be enduring that may contribute to temper flares. For instance, long-term separation during a parent's work travel can lower kids' frustration tolerance.

In some cases, it's the group care environment that contributes to biting. Too few toys, overcrowded conditions, excessive noise, or frequent change in teaching staff whittle away at children's emotional reserves.

### Tips for Responding to Biting

- Discuss the issue with your parenting partner. If you also use group care, meet with teaching staff to discuss the issue. Be prepared to share insights and ask questions. Avoid blaming or making accusations, even if your child was the one bitten. Open communication and mutual constructive problem solving work better than finger-pointing.
- No one response is best for all biting incidents. Together brainstorm response options.
- Usually biting can be stopped within 2 to 4 weeks. Once you put a response plan in action, be patient and keep daily notes. Keep track of daily progress and discuss developments with all adults concerned.
- Practice prevention. Anticipate when, where, and with whom biting might occur. When tensions build, redirect children's behavior to something more constructive. Encourage children to give playmates *more space* to reduce tension.
- Remedy stressful conditions identified during observation. If a child is teething, provide a substitute for biting, such as a teething ring.
- Limit frustrations by keeping to a predictable routine for eating, sleeping, and play time.
- With words children can understand, discuss everyone's right not to be pushed, hit, grabbed, bitten, or otherwise physically hurt. Teach children how to stand up for themselves in the face of conflict. Coach them with phrases that can be used confidently with an aggressor: "Stop that." "I don't like that." "That hurts. Don't bite me!"
- When a biting incident occurs, resist labeling a child a "biter." Never refer to them as such. Children often live up to negative labels we stick on them. Don't doom a child forever as "the biter." This behavior is temporary, not permanent.
- Accentuate the positive and express hopeful expectations. Encourage and give children positive feedback whenever they resolve conflict positively or express frustration without biting or other aggression.
- Keep close to a child who bites or who is frequently bitten (often called shadowing a child). When conflict heats up, *coach* children to use their emerging vocabulary. Prompt them to express desires and feelings BEFORE they take a step toward biting.
- When biting occurs, remain calm so all children can trust the parent or adult to remain in control and re-establish harmony.
- Comfort the bitten child first so biting isn't rewarded with an adult's immediate action. Comfort may include a lap to sit upon or a cold compress for the bitten area. In group care settings, teachers encourage empathy by asking the child who bites to get a comfort item or tissue for the child they hurt.
- As soon as a victim is comforted, firmly and simply express unquestionable disapproval of biting. Your facial expressions should confirm that biting is unacceptable, too. Convey firmness with direct eye contact and serious demeanor. Keep comments short and sweet: long lectures are lost on very young children.
- Avoid responding with physical or verbal aggression. Yelling, name-calling, spanking, biting a child back, or popping their mouth so they bite their own tongue all send counter-productive, harmful messages. And they don't work. *Always model for children how you want them to behave.* To teach control, illustrate appropriate behavior and language.
- Use simple words to express your alarm and frustration. Examples of short sentences: "I don't want you to bite." "Biting hurts." "Find another way." "Others don't want to play with you if you bite." "It is never okay to bite. I want everyone to be safe." "Tell someone you are mad, but do not bite."
- The goal is to help children develop empathy, self control, and positive social skills. Role model those skills in action. Teach children how to calm themselves and how to think of alternatives to conflict, such as playing with another friend, offering to trade or swap toys, etc.

- If a child bites to get an item (such as a toy,) don't allow it to succeed. Make sure the toy is given back to the bitten child. Say something like, "I know you want that toy a lot, but Terri is playing with it now. You can't bite to get it. When Terri is done you can play with it. Find another toy for now."
- Always project hope for children's future success. Affirm that you know they will learn to stop biting. Never emotionally abandon a child who has bitten by punishing with cold rejection, withholding love, or refusing to comfort and forgive. Though it is easier to empathize with a child bitten, the aggressing child is also under stress. An isolated, scorned, or terrified child does not stop biting; those responses create more anger and alienation — feelings no child should have to endure.

#### **Books for Parents**

- *The Emotional Life of the Toddler* by Alicia F. Fieberman. New York: Free Press, 1993.
- *Parenting Guide to Your Toddler* by Paula Spencer. New York: Random House, 2000.
- *Dear Parent: Caring for Infants with Respect* by Magda Gerber. Los Angeles: Resources for Infant Educators, 2002.

#### **Books for Your Early Childhood Program Staff**

- *No Biting: Policy and Practice for Toddler Programs* by Gretchen Kinnel. St. Paul, MN: Redleaf Press, 2002.
- *Infants, Toddlers and Caregivers: A Curriculum of Respectful, Responsive Care and Education* by Janet Gonzalez-Mena and Dianne Widmeyer Eyer. Boston, MA: McGraw-Hill, 2004.
- *Innovations: Infant-Toddler Development* by Kay Albrecht and Linda Miller. Beltsville, MD: Gryphon House, 2001.
- *PrimeTimes* (chapter 9) by Jim Greenman and Anne Stonehouse. St. Paul, MN: Redleaf Press, 1996.
- *So This is Normal Too? Teachers and Parents Working Out Developmental Issues in Young Children* (chapter 16) by Deborah Hewitt. St. Paul, MN: Redleaf Press, 1995.

#### **Online Articles for Early Childhood Program Staff**

- "Reality Bites: Biting at the Center Part 1 and Part 2" by Jim Greenman at [www.ChildCareExchange.com](http://www.ChildCareExchange.com).

**About the Author** — Karen Stephens is director of Illinois State University Child Care Center and instructor in child development for the ISU Family and Consumer Sciences Department. For nine years she wrote a weekly parenting column in her local newspaper. Karen has authored early care and education books and is a frequent contributor to *Exchange*.