

# Put a stop to biting...

## Introduction

Anecdotal evidence suggests up to a quarter of all children will bite others at some stage, with most parents conceding that it's one of the worst things your child could do in public. And, it can be just as alienating for you as for your child...

## Ouch!

Angus was a gentle toddler – loving and easy-going. But he had a nasty habit; he was a biter – not of friends or family, but he bit children he didn't know. "I couldn't believe it was happening," says his mum, "it was just awful. For a good year I avoided everything except being on my own or with close friends. I couldn't face coffee mornings, parks, soft-play areas. I just withdrew into myself."

When your child bites, it's worse than a full-blown tantrum in a supermarket. Other parents are appalled; the victim nurses a throbbing red mark and you wish you could just sink into the ground. It's about the most antisocial, public thing your child can do.

Reactions of other parents can be out of proportion," says Mallory Henson, educational psychologist. "And it's very difficult to remain calm.

Many parents of biters complain they receive an unfair dose of disapproval – often their children have been heavily provoked. "The worst thing about it is that other parents complain so much," says one mum whose seven-year-old son recently bit his classmate. "Other children have equally antisocial habits – taunting and teasing – but the biter is the one who gets the blame."

Not all kids bite, but anecdotally experts say up to a quarter of all children will do so at some stage – mostly between the ages of two and three. It is a phase that does pass – by four, most children have grown out of it. Some try the odd nip and move on, others grow into serial biters. And it's a serious problem – not least because it hurts so much and can get your child kicked out of nursery. But it doesn't mean your child is a monster – many biters are otherwise gentle and sociable.

## Why do they bite?

Understanding why a child bites is key to beating the problem. Not all children bite out of anger or to hurt another child – in fact young toddlers can't really understand how much pain they're causing. "You must ask yourself what the child is achieving by biting," says Lyn Fry, educational psychologist. "Think what the reward is for him or her – does he get a huge amount of attention?"

Experts advise parents to try and see biting as a way of communicating rather than just bad behaviour – once we do that, we've got more choices in how to respond.

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

- **Expressing emotion:** 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," says Dirk Flower, chartered psychologist. "Biting can be a way of expressing their feelings. Mothers often don't understand why it's just them who get bitten."
- **Experimenting:** 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 chomps on someone when they're teething. Sometimes toddlers nip when they're over-excited.
- **Defending:** Young children learn to bite as a defence, especially if they can't talk. David was an emotional boy who didn't learn to speak until after he turned three – and until then would bite other children whenever he grew anxious or felt 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. "When you bite, your victim moves away – it's a great defence."



## Put a stop to biting... CONTINUED

- **Controlling:** 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?
- **Frustrated or irritated:** 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 themself.

### How to stop it

In all instances, react swiftly, and keep your cool. Don't ever – ever – bite back or hit – retaliation could be dangerous. "You're just teaching them violence causes violence," says Mallory Henson. But don't dodge the issue – children need to know immediately that what they have done is wrong.

- **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. "Parents are slow to do this – but it's one of the best ways," says Lyn Fry. "Whisk your 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. If a teething child is trying out his or her teeth, find toys to chew and chomp on.
- **Teach them it's wrong:** When your child bites, use simple but firm words. Try, "that's biting, that's wrong" or a firm "no". 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, says Mr Flower: "If your child's expressing love, teach them to hug rather than bite whenever they feel strong emotions." Likewise, if your 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 hand held up) – or even gently to push the other child's shoulder – which won't hurt but gives a clear message. 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 "no". "Put your body between victim and biter and turn your back on the biter," says Mr Flower.

Give the victim sympathy and the biter a clear message this is an unproductive way of getting attention.

If time-out is one of your methods, now's the time to use it. If the bite was over a toy or treat, remove it for a short while. If a child tries to control his or her mum by biting, try physically putting a part of their body in the way as they go to bite – an arm or a leg, which will stop them in their tracks.

- **Praise them for good behaviour:** Catch your child behaving well – not biting siblings, 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, says Ms Fry. Instead try: "how well you're playing" or "aren't you kind and gentle to your little brother?".

### When nothing works

"I can't help feeling the people who give out advice haven't actually struggled with a child who bites," says one mum of a 'serial' biter. There are a number of reasons methods may not work – there may be something getting in the way of your child learning – perhaps anxiety. Some children learn at different speeds and won't pick up on things straight away – you might just need to be more persistent.

## Put a stop to biting... CONTINUED

- **Stick with it:** Keeping to a plan of action is more difficult than it seems. "You need attention, energy, consistency and support," says family therapist David Spellman. "These methods aren't rocket science, but need planning and determination." Make sure all your family and carers are on the same page – young children find it hard when they receive mixed messages. Involve nursery and carers in putting a plan together.
- **Give clear commands and be positive:** Young children can't understand negatives, so avoid "don'ts". Try "we keep our mouths to ourselves" instead. Try not to raise your voice and speak in a firm voice. Don't overdo explanations: "The first bite may be impulsive, but a child soon learns they get an enormous amount of attention," says Ms Fry. "One of the biggest mistakes is to give the warning all over again. If they continue to bite, don't go into why it's wrong, just say 'that's biting, that's wrong'."
- **When to ask for help:** Don't rush to a therapist; seek help or advice first from friends and other parents, or teachers and nurseries and health visitors, who can also point you in the right direction if you want to take it further.