“What do you do about biting?” It is a fairly common problem facing people who provide group care for toddlers. Unfortunately, there is no simple solution.

WHY DO TODDLERS BITE?

Not all toddlers bite other children. Sometimes a toddler classroom will go for months and months without a biting incident and then suddenly there’s a “rash” of biting. Since toddlers cannot analyze and explain their actions to us we can only speculate about their motivations.

1. **Teething.** Toddlers are cutting teeth and it hurts. Chewing on something relieves the itch and makes it feel better. Since there are so many other things to chew on, teething is probably not the only reason toddler bite other children.

2. **Sensory Exploration.** Toddlers are very efficient at using all of their senses to learn all about the world, they bite *everything* not just their friends. The “oral mode”, an important style of learning in infancy, is still very strong in toddlers. Both the sense of taste and the sense of touch are rewarded through biting. It feels good to bite! Skin is warm and soft, and has a pleasant salty taste. Much to the horror of staff and parents, it is frequently the new child who is bitten! Following toddler logic, “Hmmm, I know how she looks…I know how she smells…I know how she feels…I wonder how she tastes and how she sounds when she screams…” **CHOMP!**

3. **Cause and Effect.** Toddlers are the scientists of early childhood, they are constantly studying cause and effect. When biting, an action produces a predictable response - and what a response! There’s a magnificent noise; everything in the room comes to a stop. The adult in the room is sure to appear instantly. You are likely to get picked up.

4. **Mimicking.** This may be why after a long “biteless” period you suddenly have a bunch of biters! Children learn behaviors from other children, just like cup banging, waving bye-bye, etc.

5. **Self-assertion.** This is probably the most common reason toddlers bite. It’s a way to express frustration when they don’t yet have the language skills to do so. Biting, a child learns, is the quickest and most efficient way to register a protest.

WHAT YOU CAN DO TO PREVENT OR CUT DOWN ON BITING

One of the most effective techniques for changing behaviors in very young children is redirecting the undesirable behavior to the closest possible parallel activity. Considering the reasons listed of why toddlers bite, think of what other activities you can offer that would satisfy the same urges. Hopefully, you can get toddlers involved in these activities *before* they bite, and dissipate the need.

1. **Teething.** Keep a bowl of carrot sticks around. Tell a child, “If you need to bite something, tell me, and I’ll get you a carrot stick.” One teacher keeps small sponges
in ziplock bags in the refrigerator for this purpose. Another teacher puts clean wash cloths which were wet and wrung out in the freezer. This requires that you stay alert and perceptive of children’s teething distress.

2. **Sensory Exploration.** Give children plenty of opportunities to release tension through “tactile” experiences. Water play is especially soothing; playdough also allows children to squeeze out tensions. As for the new child, encourage children to come over to her and see her, and touch her while you are right there (not all at once, of course!) It may help.

3. **Cause and Effect.** There are lots of ways you can allow children to cause legitimate effects on their environment. Of course, if you perceive the effect they’re after is to get your attention, that’s another matter. The obvious and simplistic answer is to give them more attention. Look at children. Use their names. Smile. Pick them up and waltz with them for no apparent reason.

4. **Self-assertion - Communication Frustration.** Here’s the biggie! First, take a good critical look at your program and try to cut down on frustration to toddlers. Avoid crowding children. Stay within licensing standards for square footage per child, and make sure your room arrangement isn’t forcing children all into one area.

Allow for autonomy - give children options and many legitimate choices as much as possible. Let them play where they want to play. This gives children a feeling of self-control, power and reduces frustration.

“Head them off at the pass.” If you see frustration building in a child; grabbing toys or fighting with other children, screaming, whining, tantrums, etc. redirect the child. Intervene, and get them involved in something else.

Don’t require children to share too much or wait too long. Sharing is an unnatural state for toddlers; it is an emerging skill not an established skill. Toddler programs need to have multiple identical toys so children do not have to wait for a turn.

Work diligently and daily on building children’s verbal communication skills, both in giving messages and receiving messages, “Johnny, say ‘stop - don’t hit me!’”. “Tell her with words instead of screams, Jenny. Say, “I’m using this now”. “Jason, do you hear Jenny? She said, “Mine”. That means she’s using that now. You can have it when she’s through. Here’s another puzzle you can use.”

**WHAT TO DO WHEN BITING OCCURS**

Sometimes classroom conditions can be just fine and children will still bite. It just happens too fast for effective intervention. The first thing you have to do, of course, is attend to the victim. Put ice on the area immediately. If there is a break in the skin the area must be thoroughly cleaned immediately. Depending on the severity, it may need attention from a physician.
Dealing with the bite, toddlers don’t have a sense “realness” of other people. They must learn empathy. Parents often tell staff to bite the child back. Although this may convey the message that biting causes pain, it is a remedy that absolutely cannot be condoned. The real message is that it’s okay for adults to hurt people but not for children.

Bring the biter face to face with the victim. Your voice should be angry without yelling. Say to the biter something like: “Biting hurts! Lisa is crying because you hurt her very much! Look at her eyes, there are tears coming out. It’s not okay to bite!”

If you can, get the victim to say, “It hurts. I don’t want you to bite me!” Research has shown that it’s important to give a strong, emphatic, emotional response. Look angry, talk angry; no sweet-talk double messages. Emphasize how it hurts the victim. Redirect the biting child to another activity and help them to get involved in the new activity and provide extra supervision until they are settled. (Be sure you are not providing attention, just supervision. You do not want to reward the biting behavior.)

You may find it necessary to provide extra staffing to supervise the child that is biting. Document all incidents to help you identify triggers. This information can be used to make programmatic changes for this child who may reduce their biting behavior.

Provide oral stimulation through tooth brushing, textures to the face, cold foods, a teething ring and food that needs some chewing at each meal. This can be very helpful for some children.

WHAT TO DO ABOUT THE CHRONIC BITER

If you’ve tried everything, conferred with parents and used all the approaches you can think of, it may be the time to admit that group care is not the right place for this child at this time. Be sure to emphasize to parents that this doesn’t mean they have raised a monster! It is a phase that some children go through and all eventually out grow. Leave the door open for the parent to try the child in your program in another three months or so. In the meantime though, a private sitter may be better for this child. You are not only protecting the other children, you are doing what is probably best for the child.

The real key to prevent biting in your classroom is to keep children busy and happy; touch and hug a lot; cut down on toddler frustration; and give children a lot of individual attention. Do what you scan to develop empathy in toddlers by describing feelings of other children, all sorts of feelings. Organize the teaching team so one person’s function for a given period is to handle “custodial” matters, diapering, etc. leaving the other staff free to be the “play person”, directly involved with the children. Reinforce positive behaviors: “You wanted that doll, Jenny, but you waited for Jason to finish. Good job!” “Good talking, Joe! You used words to tell her what you want.”