

**Behavior Concern Scale: Aggression****Behavior:** Biting**Strategy:** Understanding and Responding to Biting**Overview**

Biting is a typical behavior for many toddlers. As children mature and gain self-regulation, they usually outgrow this behavior. When a preschooler bites, it may be due to something at home or the program that is causing the child to be upset, frustrated, confused, or afraid. Some children bite instinctively because they have not gained self-regulation. For example, when Marcus grabs a doll from Gina, her first response is to bite him and grab the doll. She doesn't stop to think about other ways to act or the result of her actions.

Biting evokes emotional reactions from teachers and parents. No matter how unpleasant one finds this behavior, however, it is important to remember that the child who bites needs your help to learn appropriate ways to behave. While you must comfort the child who was injured, it is also critical to pay attention to the child who did the biting. He is probably upset about losing control and causing injury.

**Special Concerns**

- A bite breaks the skin. (The wound can become infected or cause transmission of a communicable disease.)
- A child over age 2 bites often and does not respond to positive guidance. (It is time to involve the family to address the problem.)
- A child bites often and does not seem concerned that biting causes pain. (This may require a health and/or mental health referral.)

## Some Reasons a Child Might Bite

### Developmental

- She wants to experience the sensation of biting.
- He is exploring cause and effect. *“What happens when I bite?”*

### Communication

(If developmental language level is younger than that of a 3-year-old.)

- She is expressing needs and desires.
- He is expressing anger.
- She is expressing frustration. *“There are too many people here and I feel cramped.”*

### Other

- She is imitating other children and adults.
- He is coping with stress caused by conditions at home or the program.
- She is affected by changes in the environment or routines.
- He reacts without thinking because his self-regulation skills are limited.
- He is attempting to meet sensory needs.

## Prevention Strategies

- Maintain age-appropriate expectations for children’s behavior.
- Create be-by-myself spaces where a child can be alone for a while.
- Provide enough space in each interest area.
- Limit the number of children who can use an interest area at a time.
- Make sure the schedule, routines, and transitions are predictable and consistent.
- Use positive guidance strategies to foster development of self-regulation.
- Provide items to bite such as clean, wet, cold washcloths stored in the refrigerator.
- Offer activities and materials that allow children to relax and release tension.

### *Immediate Response*

At the Time of the incident,

Stay calm. Move quickly to the scene. Get down to children's level.

- Respond to the child who did the biting.
  - Look right at her and make a strong statement. *“No biting. I can’t let you hurt Josie or anyone else.”*
  - Offer a choice. *“You can help make Josie feel better or you can go to the quiet area until I can talk with you.”*
  - Help the child follow through on the choice if necessary.
- Respond to the child who was hurt.
  - Offer comfort through actions and words. *“I’m sorry you are hurting. Let’s get some ice.”* If the skin is broken, wash the wound with soap and warm water. The child who did the biting can help comfort the bitten child—if agreeable to both parties.
  - Help the child find something to do.
- Talk with the child who did the biting.
  - Maintain eye contact; use a calm, even, yet firm tone of voice; and speak in short sentences with simple words.
  - Try to find out what happened that led to the incident.
  - Restate the rule. *“Biting is not allowed.”*
  - Model the use of words that describe feelings. *“Kim took your ball. You felt angry. You bit Kim. No biting. I can’t let you hurt Kim.”*
  - Discuss how the child can respond in similar situations in the future. [/BL]
  - Provide opportunities to practice the alternative responses during times when emotions are not high.

### After the Incident

- Complete an accident report.
- Notify the parents of the child who was hurt. Maintain confidentiality. Do not tell them who did the biting.
- Share the problem-solving ideas that you and their child came up with so they can also practice at home.
- Consider whether anything in the program should be changed to prevent future incidents.

### Long-Term Response

When biting becomes a habit and ongoing positive guidance is not effective, it is time for teachers and parents to meet. Together, they can plan an approach to addressing the child's behavior that can be applied consistently at home and at the program. Use the six steps of Positive Guidance Planning described earlier in this chapter.

### Approach

- Define the behavior.
- Find the cause of the behavior.
- Develop a plan to address the causes and to help the child replace biting with acceptable behaviors.
- Try the plan at home and at the program for several weeks. Be patient.
- It takes time to change behaviors that have become habits. Keep in touch to share information about changes in behavior.
- Evaluate the effectiveness of the plan. Make changes if needed.

### Possible Strategies

- Observe to learn where, when, and in what situations biting occurs.
- Pay attention to the signals. Stay close and step in when the child seems ready to bite. Suggest acceptable ways to express strong feelings.
- Separate the child from the group for a while immediately after a biting incident. Explain that you cannot let him bite others. After regaining control, the child can come back and play with the others.
- Use a reminder system to help the child learn to express strong feelings with appropriate words and actions.
- Reinforce positive behavior by using effective praise that describes the child's appropriate words and actions.
- Be sure your expectations for behavior are both age-appropriate and individually appropriate for the child.