



What to do When...

Helping a Child Learn Alternatives to Biting

(“What to do When...” provides short term advice for teachers when they are confronted by common challenging situations. Refer to the Additional Resources to learn more about preventing and managing children’s challenging behavior.)

When a young child bites another child

1. Gently but firmly guide the child who is the biter away from the child who was bitten and check for injury. Do not pull or push the child who did the biting physically, or wrap the child in your arms, or encourage the victim to “bite back”.
2. Assure the injured child that (s)he is safe. Tell him or her that you will protect them and that you understand their feelings. You may show the injury to the biter (to teach the consequence of his or her action) and that comfort is important for the child who was hurt (to model empathy and concern).
3. Model remaining calm. Position yourself face-to-face with the child who did the biting. (Be aware that too much of your attention (for example, lecturing, scolding, giving lengthy instructions) may reinforce unwanted behavior.)
4. Gently but firmly say something to the biter like “Biting hurts. I do not allow other people to hurt you, and I will not allow you to hurt other people by biting them. You may not bite anyone.” Or “We may bite our food, but not people.” Or “Use your mouth to say words when you want something, not to bite other people.”
5. Encourage the biter to express his or her feelings about the incident, and if (s)he shows concern for the other child or an apology, reinforce the positive behavior with something like “ I’m glad that you told (the other child) that you are concerned; tell (him or her) what you want to say.” Down-play reactions from the biter that indicate (s)he doesn’t understand, but repeat that you have to keep everyone safe, and then redirect both children to another activity.
6. Be alert for more possibilities of biting by staying close to the biter and jumping in between the biter and the possible victims, to prevent more incidents.



Additional Resources available online at www.vanderbilt.edu/csefel

For advice about biting in toddlers, read “Responding to Your Child’s Bite” under Family Tools or type www.vanderbilt.edu/csefel/documents/biting-parenting_tool.pdf into your browser.

