

**Cherubs Preschool
Information Sheet – Biting**

Biting: Why it happens and what to do about it



Why pre-schoolers bite

It can be shocking to hear that your pre-schooler has bitten another child – or to feel his teeth sinking into you. But the behaviour isn't at all unusual.

By the time children are in preschool, most have bitten someone at least once and have also been on the receiving end of an unfriendly chomp. Children bite less frequently as they get older and can talk about their feelings but at this age biting is still common in situations where lots of children are together.

Children may bite when they're overcome by fear, anger, or frustration, for instance. Or they may bite because someone bit *them*. Pre-schoolers often bite during a fight if they feel cornered or fear they are about to be hurt.

Coping with a major change, such as a new baby in the family or a new home, can also cause emotional upset that may result in aggressive behaviour. And sometimes children bite simply to gauge the effect it will have, because they're excited or overstimulated, or as a misplaced expression of love.

Still, knowing that biting is common doesn't make it any easier when your pre-schooler has bitten another child or has been bitten. You may not only be upset to find out that your child's been biting, but other parents may be up in arms over the incident as well. The most important thing to keep in mind is that children don't *want* to hurt others. They'd much rather play, explore, and

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enjoy their friends. Understanding what's behind biting is the first step in getting your child to stop.

What to do when your pre-schooler bites

Make sure both children are safe. First, separate the children and make sure they're out of biting distance of each other.

Stay calm, set boundaries, and don't blame or punish. In simple, direct language tell your child that biting hurts and that they are not allowed to do it. Physical punishment may cause anger and resentment that, over time, can lead a child to act out even more.

Help both children. Both the child who's been bitten and the biter need your help. First you'll need to check the damage and maybe provide some medical attention along with plenty of warmth and caring.

But don't neglect the child who did the biting. They may act as if they do not care, or like they are unaware of how much pain they have inflicted – no one looks more impassive than a child who's just hurt someone.

Being warm and caring to them as well helps them feel comfortable enough to express their own emotions, both about the bite and about whatever was frustrating or overwhelming them in the first place.

Encourage your pre-schooler to come to you when they are upset. You may not be able to be with your child when they are having their hardest times – say, at preschool or nursery – but they need to learn that they can ask you or another adult for help.

Suggest that they come to you when they are having a hard time, and then give your child your full attention when they do.

Talk about what happened. Once you've both calmed down, pick a quiet moment to ask, "How can you let someone know you're angry without hurting them?" and "How can you ask an adult for help when you don't like what other children are doing?"

Do some simple role-playing to work through these situations. ("You pretend to be Sonya from preschool, and you take my bunny.") Your child may pick up some lines they can use later. ("No! I don't like that!") Many pre-schoolers bite once, get help handling it, and never do it again.

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How to prevent biting

Think about when and why your child bites. Is it at pre-school when another child snatches something that they want to play with? When other children are crowding them? Does the child try to bite you when you're nursing the new baby?

Your child's teacher may also have clues about what sets the child off. After a while, you'll probably be able to predict when your child is likely to lash out and be ready to intervene.

Watch your child closely. Warning signs, such as crying, yelling and foot-stamping may often precede biting. If they have been biting, watch your pre-schooler and step in before they do it again.

Redirect your child's attention. If your child's emotions are running high and you're worried that they are getting ready to take a nip at a friend, turn their attention toward a different activity, such as dancing, painting, or playing a game.

Stop him before they bite again. If it looks like your child is getting ready to bite again, get physically close to them and calmly prevent them from sinking his teeth into their target. You might say something like, "I can't let you hurt Billy," or "Oh, I don't think I want those teeth any closer."

Stay warm and loving toward the child. This may be hard when you're trying to prevent them from biting – you may be emotional yourself or feel enormous pressure to yell or stop them by force. But if you can remember how much you love your child while you're restraining them, they may feel safe enough to show you how sad or mad they feel.

It really helps to get yourself on your child's side and remember that they are doing the best they can at any given moment. They may be able to tell you about their feelings in words or they may not, but it doesn't really matter. You may have to intervene this way a number of times before your child is able to stop themselves from biting.

Use positive reinforcement. Most children this age are usually cooperative with other kids and increasingly interested in developing new friendships. Biting usually tapers off around age 3 when a child's language and social skills become more developed.

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Children this age can express their feelings, share, and understand another child's point of view. Tap into your child's growing emotional intelligence by praising the kind of good behaviour that will help them make – and keep – new friends.

Be with them when playing with friends until the biting problem resolves itself, or at least warn other parents ahead of time and give them a few tips on what works best with your child. If you think they won't be able to handle the situation in a calm and loving way, it's probably best to reschedule.

Never bite your child back. Some parents think this tactic drives home the point that biting is painful. But what it really does is show your child the wrong way to deal with aggression – that is, by becoming aggressive in return so never bite your child, even in fun.

Talk about biting. Talk about biting – but don't preach – or play a simple game. Ask your child to tell you some foods they like to bite. Or name everyday objects (a cupcake, a table, a dog, a banana) and ask them whether they're okay to bite. You can get progressively sillier (a car, the vacuum cleaner, Daddy's shoes) and both of you can laugh about it.