

When Biting Happens: Responding with Care, Teaching with Intention

Biting is a common and developmentally appropriate behavior in early childhood settings. Though understandably distressing for both children and adults, it's important to respond in a way that supports emotional learning and safety rather than focusing on punishment. This document provides guidance for early childhood providers on how to respond when biting occurs, centering the response on compassion, understanding, and teaching.

When biting happens, the first step is to attend to the child who was bitten. Offering immediate care is essential—not only to address any physical harm but also to provide emotional comfort. Calm, nurturing reassurance helps the bitten child feel safe and supported, reinforcing the adult as a source of security in the classroom environment. A simple response like, “I’m here. That hurt. Let’s help your body feel better,” validates the child’s experience without escalating fear or anxiety.

Equally important is how we respond to the child who bit. Children bite for many reasons, including teething, sensory exploration, frustration, limited communication skills, or emotional overwhelm. Instead of shaming or punishing, adults can guide the child by identifying the underlying feeling and teaching a more appropriate behavior. For example, saying, “Biting hurts. When you're mad, you can stomp your feet or come to me for help,” offers a clear message while modeling emotional regulation and alternatives.

The focus should always be on teaching, not punishing. Punishment may momentarily stop the behavior, but it does not help the child learn how to manage their feelings or build social skills. By using consistent language, modeling empathy, and offering developmentally appropriate choices, providers create an environment where children feel safe to express their needs and emotions.

Understanding the reasons behind biting is crucial. Young children often lack the verbal skills or self-regulation to handle big feelings, and biting can be their way of expressing what they cannot yet say. Observing patterns in behavior—such as what happens before biting, the time of day, or specific triggers—can provide valuable insights. This awareness allows providers to proactively address needs before biting occurs.

Responding to biting incidents with a calm and thoughtful approach also helps build trust with families. When providers explain the context of the incident and how they supported both children involved, families are more likely to feel confident in the provider’s ability to handle challenging behaviors appropriately and with care.

Ultimately, responding to biting with intention helps children learn to navigate social situations, build self-control, and feel secure in their environments. It also reinforces the role of caregivers as compassionate guides, rather than disciplinarians. Every instance of

biting is an opportunity to teach—not just the child who bit, but the entire group—about empathy, boundaries, and the many ways we can express ourselves without harm.

For providers seeking further support, consider exploring additional resources, reflective supervision, or peer discussion groups to continue building confidence in managing behavior with empathy and insight.

Recommended Resources for Extended Learning:

- Zero to Three (2020). *Understanding and Responding to Children Who Bite*. Retrieved from <https://www.zerotothree.org>
- Center on the Social and Emotional Foundations for Early Learning (CSEFEL). *Teaching Your Child to: Stop Biting*. Retrieved from <http://csefel.vanderbilt.edu>
- American Academy of Pediatrics. (2019). *Biting in Child Care*. HealthyChildren.org. Retrieved from <https://www.healthychildren.org>
- Hearn, P. F., & Hildebrand, V. (2014). *Guiding Young Children*. (9th ed.). Pearson.
- Kaiser, B., & Rasminsky, J. S. (2016). *Challenging Behavior in Young Children: Understanding, Preventing, and Responding Effectively*. (4th ed.). Pearson.