

# Why Do Toddlers Bite?

It's easy to assume that children bite because they can't yet communicate well with words – which means that it's easy for adults to assume that biting is the child's problem. More likely, says Lisa Poelle, M.A., author of *The Biting Solution: The Expert's No-Biting Guide for Parents, Caregivers, and Early Childhood Educators*, biting, hitting and other aggressive behavior results from such issues as:

- Stress, either from the usual environment (parents always arguing, for example), or because of a special event such as the birth of a sibling, a move or the death of a pet or family member
- An over-, or under-stimulating environment (say, a child care center with too much color, too much action, too much noise)
- Expectations for behavior that are unrealistic given the child's developmental level or temperament
- Inconsistent limits or boundaries, like punishing children who grab toys by grabbing the toys away from them, or swatting children who hit
- Lack of schedules and routines
- Not being taught to take turns and to be aware of other children's feelings



Stopping biting or other hurtful behavior requires a careful look at all aspects of the child's environment and temperament, and the how-to's for that are detailed in Poelle's book and in the tip [What to Do When a Child Bites](#). Among immediate actions that she recommends that parents and caregivers take:

- Make sure the child has access to toys that can be safely mouthed, and to soothing items like a damp washcloth cold from the refrigerator
- Provide "loveys" like a stuffed toy or small blanket for comfort when the child is upset
- Offer large-motor activities like running, jumping, and molding play-dough so the child can work off strong emotions
- Provide a place where the child can retreat if the environment is overstimulating, and recognize that some children require more personal space than others
- Ensure that the child has a variety of toys and books that teach cause-and-effect: a cobbler's bench and lift-the-flap books, for example
- Reduce the length of time the child is expected to sit quietly, and provide entertainment (books, crayons, hand puppets) for when a child must wait for something
- Model the behavior you want to see in the child: ask to have a toy returned instead of grabbing, avoid joking about biting ("I'm going to eat you up!"), and skip swatting or spanking as a means of discipline
- Establish routines and schedules, and warn the child when it's almost time to transition from one activity to another
- Talk about how other people appear to feel
- Encourage language, model appropriate behavior and allow choices to be made by narrating what you're doing: "I'm getting a bunny off the shelf for Sara and a bear off the shelf for you. Later, you can ask Sara if she'd like to trade toys with you. Or you can serve the bear breakfast with the dishes in the kitchen."

Many more ideas for assessing what may be causing a child's aggressive behavior and how to squelch it are in *The Biting Solution: The Expert's No-Biting Guide for Parents, Caregivers, and Early Childhood Educators* by Lisa Poelle, M.A.