



Biting

Biting is distressing but normal, and most children outgrow biting behavior by age 3 to 3.5 years.

CAUSE

Biting can be exploratory (to find out how something tastes), soothing (when teething), playful (as they explore), reactive (when emotionally overwhelmed), or strategic (if they learn biting gets another child to give up a toy).

PREVENTION

Provide teething babies with safe things to chew on. Provide toddlers with enough play space to minimize crowding, and help them share space. Help toddlers learn words to say to express their feelings and needs instead of biting. Praise children when they communicate with words and gestures. Read books that remind children of safe ways to interact and touch others. Do not label a specific child as a "biter," but try to observe patterns of when, where, why, and whom a child tends to bite.

RESPONSE

Comfort and examine the child who was bitten and apply first-aid. Remove the child who is biting and firmly say, "Stop. No biting. Biting hurts." Explain to the child that he has hurt the other child. Then remind the child of a better way to get what he or she needs. Remain calm and firm to avoid giving too much reinforcing attention to the child who bit.

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Saying "No!"

One of the first words toddlers often learn to say is "no." It is a powerful word because it asserts independence, self-defense, or control.

CAUSE

Sometimes the child means "I'm not ready to do that yet," or "I'm scared to do that," or "I don't like that activity." Sometimes he or she means, "Don't take that away from me, it's mine!" Think about the meaning of a child's "no" to guide your response.

PREVENTION

Build warm relationships with children to promote cooperation. When children feel unloved or are constantly told "no," they will imitate this behavior more often. Have a well-organized room with plenty of fun activities to promote positive attitudes toward school. Have predictable classroom routines and schedules so that children can prepare for transitions and feel safe.

RESPONSE

Choose a strategy that best addresses the cause. If a child is afraid to try an activity, offer to help. If a child is not ready to stop an activity, talk about the aspects of what's coming next. If it is toward another child, help negotiate turn-taking. Make a game out of the activity (e.g., if a child won't leave the playground, challenge a race to the door). If the child still won't cooperate, offer a basic choice: "You can come by yourself or I can help you." If it isn't important the child comply immediately, wait until the child is ready. Praise and thank children for cooperation.

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Hitting & Kicking

Aggressive behaviors such as hitting, kicking, pushing, or pinching are common concerns. Toddlers cannot control their impulses and they do not understand that others feel pain.

CAUSE

Crowding (sharing a small space) and limited resources (like toys) are more likely to result in physical conflicts between toddlers. Children will also imitate what they see, in real life or on TV.

PREVENTION

Set up the classroom to allow space for the activities children do and the number of children in the room. Make sure you have enough chairs at the table or spaces on the carpet for all children to sit comfortably and see and reach materials. Have more than one of popular items, limit certain toys to small group time, and structure turn-taking. Encourage gentle touches and praise children when they express themselves in words. Remind parents how easily toddlers will imitate behaviors.

RESPONSE

Intervene quickly but calmly. Tell children you are there to keep them safe and to help them with their problem. You might say, "Hold on Reggie and Joseph. You may not hit each other. We need to stay safe. It looks like you both want to use that shovel. I can help you." Help them find a better way to get what they want, using prompts or strategies that are within their ability. Because young children have short attention spans and are not able to reflect on their behaviors, "time out" for every offense is not necessary or effective. It is better to take a firm but patient approach rather than focusing on punishing or scolding.

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Not Sharing Toys

Children get better at sharing around age 4, when they can use language to negotiate turn-taking and have more self-control when waiting for their turns.

CAUSE

Babies don't understand that other people have wants and needs, or that toys must be shared. They don't understand personal space, so they don't see another baby's toy as off limits. They lack the language to understand rules about turn-taking and do not understand that if they give up a toy, they will get it back.

PREVENTION

Have plenty of toys and interesting materials available. Establish trust so that children don't feel they need to defend everything they have. Offer children choices (e.g., "Finished with that crayon? Can we give George a turn with it?") and respect their answers. Activities such as rolling a ball back and forth and offering each other pretend food lay a foundation for sharing.

RESPONSE

If a baby takes a toy from another baby and neither is showing distress, you may "let it go." When children show distress, respond calmly, using simple words and actions to prevent harm and facilitate turn-taking. For example, you might say gently, "Hold on Raymond. Jesse is using that car. I'll help you find another one." When working with children who talk, give them language for sharing. For example, "Emily is using the bucket. If you want a turn, you can ask her: 'Can I have a turn?'" Prompt the other child to answer using words such as "yes" or "later."

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Infant Distress

Young babies have very limited ways of communicating their needs. The most common way they communicate distress is by crying.

CAUSE

They may be hungry, scared, tired, wet or soiled, sick, hot, cold, or needing social attention. When caregivers know their babies very well, they may be able to hear differences in a baby's cries (e.g., the difference between a "hungry cry" and a "tired cry").

PREVENTION

Be attentive to each infant, making sure she is dry, clean, and appropriately dressed for the temperature. Look for signals. After a nap, the baby may be alert and ready for a game or a picture book. A baby rubbing her eyes and yawning is ready for a nap. Anticipate these needs, follow familiar routines, and respond promptly to the baby's signals to help minimize prolonged distress.

RESPONSE

Respond promptly. There is no such thing as "spoiling" a baby by responding to crying with attention or cuddling. Check to see if the baby is wet, soiled, hot, or cold. Consider whether she might be hungry or tired. Talk warmly to the baby and try to engage her in play if she is needing social attention. If distress is unexplained, use physical soothing strategies (e.g., gentle rocking). Some babies use a pacifier or suck their thumb.

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Separation Anxiety

Between 7 and 10 months, many infants start to cry or cling when a familiar caregiver leaves.



CAUSE

Children feel safe and secure with certain people. They do not have the same concept of time that adults have, nor the ability to understand explanations—when a caregiver leaves, the baby does not know whether she'll return in 5 minutes or at all.

PREVENTION

Teachers should focus on building trusting relationships with children so that they feel safe in the classroom. Have a routine for morning drop-off: create rituals for goodbye, such as blowing a kiss to the parent and helping the teacher with a task. A special "transitional object," such as a special blanket, can help the child soothe himself.

RESPONSE

Provide comfort and reassurance, both physically and verbally. Hug, sing a soothing song, and/or reassure the child that the parent will come back later. Put words to her feelings by saying, "You feel sad. It's hard to say goodbye." Do not scold, tease, or ignore children who are crying, as this can leave them feeling emotionally abandoned. It's okay to use some distraction to entice the child into a play activity, eating breakfast, or other routine tasks.

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Stranger Anxiety

Emerging around the time of separation anxiety, stranger anxiety reflects the baby's attachment relationships and awareness that what is new may not be safe.

CAUSE

Stranger anxiety is typically triggered by a new adult approaching or picking up the child before the child is comfortable with him or her. Some children will hide and cling as soon as an adult makes eye contact or begins to talk. Other children are comfortable being greeted as long as they do not get too close or try to pick them up.

PREVENTION

Young children should be cautious with people whom they do not know—it is not safe for children to be too comfortable going off with strangers. However, you can signal to children which adults are safe and friendly, and your calm, welcoming manner toward the other adult will let children know that it is okay to engage with them.

RESPONSE

Let children warm up gradually and decide when they are ready to talk with the new person. Children should not be forced to hug or sit with strangers. If the person needs to interact with the child (e.g., to complete an assessment), you can reassure the child by smiling, introducing the stranger, and telling the child in simple words why the person is there (e.g., "This is Miss Monica. She came to play with us today. It's okay, you can show her our toys.")

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Tantrums

A child may scream, stomp his feet, yell angry words, throw himself on the floor, and lash out physically. Tantrums often begin around 18 months and usually lessen between ages 3-4.

CAUSE

Tantrums occur when the child's ability to cope is overwhelmed, usually because they cannot have or do what they want. Tantrums are more likely when children are tired, hungry, not feeling well, or overstimulated.

PREVENTION

While children need structure, being overly rigid tends to result in more power struggles. Offer acceptable choices, e.g., "It's not safe to throw the cars. You can push the cars on the rug or throw a ball into the basket." Watch for escalating emotion and help them calm down by talking in a quiet voice, labeling the child's feelings, stating your understanding of the problem (e.g., "You want to stay outside"), and offering comfort and help.

RESPONSE

Move other children away and make sure the area is safe. Let the child express her anger as long as she is not hurting herself or others. She may not be able to process your words, so use physical soothing strategies first, such as rubbing her back. When the tantrum starts to decrease, label the child's feelings and connect her feelings to the situation ("I know you were mad we left the playground."). Offer comfort she can accept or reject ("Want to rock with me?"). If too young to understand, explain ("Let's rock for a few minutes"). As she calms down, suggest an activity to help her transition.

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