

Supporting young children who bite

A guide for
early years providers



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Understanding why young children bite

Biting is a common behaviour in early childhood and can stem from various underlying reasons. It is important to view biting as a symptom of an unmet need rather than as a deliberate attempt to harm. Young children bite for reasons such as:

- **Sensory exploration**
Babies and toddlers often use their mouths to explore their world.
- **Emotional overwhelm**
Feelings such as frustration, excitement or distress can result in impulsive biting.
- **Dysregulated nervous system**
When a child is overstimulated or struggling to self-regulate, biting can serve as a coping mechanism.
- **Limited communication skills**
If a child cannot yet express their needs or emotions verbally; they may resort to biting as a form of communication.

Rather than reacting with anger, adults should respond with curiosity, looking beneath the behaviour to understand what the child is trying to express.



The importance of a calm response

When adults react with frustration or anger, it reinforces the child's distress and can escalate the behaviour. Instead, responding with calmness and emotional containment demonstrates an alternative way of managing big feelings. This models self-regulation and helps the child feel safe.

The role of co-regulation

Young children need repeated experiences of co-regulation before they can develop the ability to regulate themselves. Co-regulation is when a supportive adult helps a child manage their emotions by providing a calm, reassuring presence. This can be through soothing touch, gentle tone of voice, empathetic validation and consistent emotional availability. When children experience co-regulation regularly, they begin to internalise these skills and build their own self-regulation capacity over time.

Four relational strategies to use in the moment when a child bites

1

Pause and connect

- a. Instead of reacting immediately, take a deep breath and ensure your body language remains open and calm.
- b. Get down to the child's level, make gentle eye contact and use a soft, reassuring tone.

2

Acknowledge and name the feeling

- a. "I see you're feeling really frustrated right now. It's hard when we want something and can't have it."
- b. Naming the emotion helps build the child's emotional vocabulary and reduces overwhelm.

3

Be gentle with the child, firm with the boundary

- a. Use a soothing voice and gentle touch while maintaining a clear boundary: "I can't let you bite. Biting hurts. I am here to keep you and your friends safe."
- b. Avoid punitive responses, children learn best when they feel secure and understood.

4

Stay curious and model calm regulation

- a. Observe the child's response and remain open to understanding the 'why' behind their behaviour.
- b. Model calm regulation: "I can see you're feeling big feelings. Let's take a deep breath together."
- c. When adults model emotional regulation, children learn alternative ways to manage frustration.

Four activities to help children learn alternative coping strategies

These activities support the child in developing self-regulation skills and finding healthier ways to express needs.

1

Chew basket for sensory needs

Offer safe, chewable objects such as teething toys, textured chew necklaces or crunchy snacks. This helps to meet sensory-seeking needs in a safe way.

2

Anger release movement play

Provide an outlet for physical energy with jumping, stomping or hitting a soft cushion. This encourages children to safely discharge big emotions instead of biting.

3

Practising communication alternatives

Use puppets or role-play scenarios to help children practice saying “I need space” or “I need a turn”. This supports children in using words and gestures instead of biting.

4

Breathing and sensory calming strategies

Teach techniques such as “smell the flower, blow out the candle” or rubbing a soft fabric. This helps children to regulate their nervous system and build impulse control.

Biting is a phase that many young children go through, and with a relational approach, adults can support children in learning healthier ways to express their needs. By remaining curious, modelling calmness, engaging in co-regulation and providing alternative coping strategies, we help children develop essential self-regulation skills that will benefit them for life.

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