

## Biting in Children



### Question

*Why do babies and children bite and will they grow out of the behaviour?*

### Answer

Children bite for all sorts of reasons, but most grow out of the behaviour on their own.

Babies may clamp down on the breast to reduce the flow of milk if it is too fast for them or bite the teat of the bottle. They may bite when they are distracted, over-excited, when they are teething, tired or when they have lost interest in feeding. Babies bite up, not down. Their bottom jaw moves, but their top jaw stays fixed.

Babies may also bite people to find out how they taste. Very often, they do not realize that they are causing physical pain to others.

Biting in children is fairly common. About 25 percent of 2 to 3 year-olds bite at some stage. Pent-up emotions and frustration are possible causes when words fail.

### What to do

If your baby should clamp down on your breast, put him in an upright position. Allow your baby to chew on a clean teething ring between feeds.

If you have an older child, find out if the behaviour has been copied from friends or whether it has occurred because he feels provoked, isolated, anxious or threatened. A new baby brother or sister, moving house and starting a new school are major steps in your child's life. Biting may be the best way to get the attention that he needs. Even negative attention is better than no attention at all.

The best way to deal with biting is to remain calm. Immediately tell your child, "No biting!" If the biting does not stop, repeat the command. Remove your child from the activity or situation, turn your back on him and walk a few steps away. Give the victim lots of sympathy and attention. When things have calmed down, explain why you don't want your child to bite, but avoid lengthy explanations, which he may not understand. Encourage him to issue an apology to the bitten child. Involve your child's nursery or preschool in the same plan of action.

Do not reinforce the behaviour by biting back. This only gives the message that biting is okay. Imagine how embarrassing it would be if your child told his teacher what you did!

Look out for warning signs. If you see your child clenching his teeth or foot-stamping, quickly remove him from the person who is about to be bitten. When things have calmed down, encourage your child to find a less painful way to express his feelings. Playing with dough, helping with household chores, running around outdoors, making music and going to the park are great ways to relieve anger and frustration.

Tell your child to come to you, or his teacher, if he feels upset, angry or hurt. Teach him to hug rather than to bite whenever he feels strong emotions. Praise your child when he is kind and gentle.

If a new baby is the possible cause of pent-up emotions, give your child the attention he needs when your baby is sleeping. Enlist the support of another adult so that you can spend time with your child.