

Behavior At-a-Glance: Biting

Background: Understanding Biting Behavior

Biting is an expected but interfering behavior seen in young children as they learn to express themselves and manage big feelings. Children may bite when they feel frustrated, overwhelmed, excited, or are trying to communicate a need without having the words to do so. Biting may occur for a multitude of reasons, but it is still a behavior that happens in response to an unmet need.

After trying these strategies, you can seek additional support at OhioPromise.org/EC-COE.

1 | Prepare

Considerations

Several factors could be affecting a child's biting behavior:

- Could be tired, thirsty, or hungry
- Teething or mouth pain
- Ear infections and other sickness
- Mouthing items/chewies not available
- Emotional regulation skills

Communication

What are all ways the child makes their needs known? Build on communication skills such as:

- Eye gaze
- Gestures, signs, sounds, words
- Taking your hand and leading you
- Picture cards or a device

2 | Observe

Before

What do you notice before the child starts to bite? Some examples could be:

- An adult began helping another child, and attention shifted away
- A friend reached for a crayon the child was holding
- You noticed excessive saliva from their mouth

During

Write down exactly what the biting looks like. Here are some ideas:

- The child grabbed the teacher's leg and bit
- The child leaned in and bit the friend on the arm
- The child bit into a nearby object like a block or fabric toy

After

What happens after? How did others respond? Some things that might be happening:

- Adult said, "Ow! That hurt! We don't bite..."
- The friend pulled their hand away. The child who bit kept their crayon
- A caregiver picked the child up and put them in a highchair to eat a snack

Family Connection

Early care and education professionals can partner with families to address biting behavior. Ask what happens before, during, and after biting. Share any use of pacifiers or chew items. Matching positive strategies between settings helps children build new skills in place of biting. Some questions to ask are:

1. "Have you been experiencing biting? When does it happen and what does it look like?"
2. "When your child bites, how do you or other caregivers usually respond?"
3. "Do you see your child trying to eat non-food items? If yes, what kind of items?"

3 | Strong Starts

Before going in depth on a particular plan, start with these recommendations:

1. Create a fun and engaging learning space with predictable routines
2. Plan opportunities for meaningful connections with children and adults
3. Aim for 5 positive interactions for every correction you give
4. Be the example of how to communicate positively with words and actions

4 | Support with Strategies

Attention/Connection

- Teach the child how to communicate and connect with you using words, signs, picture cards, or gestures
- Respond calmly to biting; praise/give big reactions to positive communication
- Show how to blow kisses, creating space between their mouth and skin contact

Escape/Avoidance

- Check if the activity is too hard for the child to do or if a skill is missing. Consider breaking the activity into smaller, easier steps.
- Consider helping the child participate in the activity by taking a turn before leaving

Tangible- Access to Item or Activity

- If biting gets the child an item, build skills for the child to request the item instead
- Highlight friends that are communicating appropriately to get a toy or activity
- Give access to a desired toy or activity after the child goes a reasonable time without biting

Sensory

- Provide age-appropriate chewable toys/teething items with permission and supervision.
- Determine developmentally appropriate foods with varied textures
- If a pacifier is used, collaborate with the family on when it is used and future plans

Quick-Reference: Strategies by Function

Function	What to Look For	What to Work On	How to Reinforce
Escape	Biting themselves to get out of a highchair	A way to communicate "All done"	Help the child out after they attempt communication
Attention	Biting you for a big reaction	A way to get others attention	Respond positively to gentle touch and communication
Tangible	Biting a caregiver to get a food item	A way to communicate "Eat"	Offer the food item after a communication attempt
Sensory	Biting while excited or overstimulated	Calming ideas or use sensory items	Shared calm with the child or provide sensory items

5 | Reflect and Revise

Changing behavior such as biting takes time. Try to remain calm as you support the child's learning. Reflect on the questions below, revisit the steps above, and seek additional support if needed.

- "What changes have we seen since using our strategies consistently for at least 2 weeks?"
- "What are some additional strategies we could put in place to reduce biting?"
- "How have we been reinforcing the positive behaviors we wish to see?"