

# FACTS *for* FAMILIES

No. 81

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## FIGHTING AND BITING

All people have aggressive feelings. As adults, we learn how to control these feelings. Children, however, are often physically aggressive--they hit, bite and scratch others. These behaviors are fairly common and often appear by the child's first birthday. Parents often struggle over how to manage their child's aggressive and/or destructive behavior.

While some biting can occur during normal development, persistent biting can be a sign that a child has emotional or behavioral problems. While many children occasionally fight with or hit others, frequent and/or severe physical aggression may mean that a child is having serious emotional or behavioral problems that require professional evaluation and intervention. Persistent fighting or biting when a child is in daycare or preschool can be a serious problem. At this age, children have much more contact with peers and are expected to be able to make friends and get along.

### BITING

Many children start aggressive biting between one and three years of age. Biting can be a way for a child to test his or her power or to get attention. Some children bite because they are unhappy, anxious or jealous. Sometimes biting may result from excessive or harsh discipline or exposure to physical violence. Parents should remember that children who are teething might also bite. Biting is the most common reason children get expelled from day care.

#### What to do:

- Say "no", immediately, in a calm but firm and disapproving tone.
- For a toddler (one-two years), firmly hold the child, or put the child down.
- For a young child (two-three years) say, "biting is not okay because it hurts people."
- Do NOT bite a child to show how biting feels. This teaches the child aggressive behavior.
- If biting persists, try a negative consequence. For example, do not hold or play with a child for five minutes after he or she bites.

If these techniques or interventions are not effective, parents should talk to their family physician.

### FIGHTING AND HITTING

Toddlers and preschool age children often fight over toys. Sometimes children are unintentionally rewarded for aggressive behavior. For example, one child may push another child down and take away a toy. If the child cries and walks away, the aggressive child feels successful

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since he or she got the toy. It is important to identify whether this pattern is occurring in children who are aggressive.

### What to do:

- It is more effective to intervene before a child starts hitting. For example, intervene as soon as you see the child is very frustrated or getting upset.
- When young children fight a lot, supervise them more closely.
- If a child hits another child, immediately separate the children. Then try to comfort and attend to the other child.
- For a toddler (one-two years) say, “No hitting. Hitting hurts.”
- For a young child (two-three years) say, “I know you are angry, but don’t hit. Hitting hurts.” This begins to teach empathy to your child.
- Do NOT hit a child if he or she is hitting others. This teaches the child to use aggressive behavior.
- Parents should not ignore or down play fighting between siblings.

When hitting or fighting is frequent, it may be a sign that a child has other problems. For example, he or she may be sad or upset, have problems controlling anger, have witnessed violence or may have been the victim of abuse at day care, school, or home.

Research has shown that children who are physically aggressive at a younger age are more likely to continue this behavior when they are older. Studies have also shown that children who are repeatedly exposed to violence and aggression from TV, videos and movies act more aggressively. If a young child has a persistent problem with fighting and biting or aggressive behavior, parents should seek professional assistance from a child and adolescent psychiatrist or other mental health professional who specializes in the evaluation and treatment of behavior problems in very young children.

For more information, see *Facts for Families* # 52 Comprehensive Psychiatric Evaluation; #55 Understanding Violent Behavior in Children; #72 Oppositional Defiant Disorder; #43 Discipline.

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