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Attack of the Toddler

By Denise Schipani

Does your 1-year-old hit and bite? Stop his aggressive behavior -- once and for all.

How to Stop Your Child's Hitting and Biting

Picture a clear-blue summer sky. That's my 18-month-old son, James, when he's in a happy mood. Then imagine storm clouds filling that sky. That's what it's like when his mood suddenly darkens and James takes a swat at his dad or bites his big brother on the arm. There are reasons for my son's outbursts, of course: He needs a diaper change, he's frustrated that he can't get his shoes off, or he's jealous that his brother is hugging me.

I try to remind myself that this is normal for a 1-year-old. After all, hitting and biting are ways that toddlers test their limits and communicate their thoughts and emotions. "Kids this age don't have the ability to do or say what they want, and that frustrates them," says Parents advisor Jennifer Shu, MD, a pediatrician in Atlanta.

That's not the only explanation for these behaviors. There's also the lure of imitation: Your child may have seen his older sibling and his pal punching it out, and now he wants in on the action. "For some children, there's a trial-and-error factor," says Dr. Shu. "They see another person hitting and think, 'Hmm, let's see how that feels.'" Finally, some children -- those who are less easygoing by nature -- are predisposed to leading with their fists or teeth. "A lot comes down to temperament," explains child psychiatrist Stanley Turecki, MD, author of *The Difficult Child*. While some kids will just shrug and move on when someone snatches Elmo out of their hands, others go into street-fighter mode. Gypsy Bachiller's 20-month-old son, Max, is one of them. "He's smaller than his twin brother, Matt, but he's always been more aggressive," says the Miami mom. "He'll hit or push his brother when he doesn't get his way."

It's one thing to understand why your child hits and bites, but it's completely another to console a sibling who's got teeth marks on his hand or to be shunned from a playgroup thanks to your toddler's right hook. Here are some ways you can stop your child's hitting and biting.

- **Respond Immediately**

"The moment your child hits or bites, remove her from the situation, then make a clear statement in a stern voice about how hitting is wrong, such as, 'No! We don't hit. Hitting hurts,'" says Dr. Turecki. Overexplaining is lost on little ones -- and may backfire. The more you engage your child in discussion, the more attention she gets from being aggressive.

- **Disarm and Distract**

If your toddler hits a pal while trying to get at a toy, immediately take the fought-over item away. Children this age are too young to understand the concept of taking turns, so the best strategy is to direct both children's attention away from the coveted object and onto something else. Give each of them a new ball, game, or doll to play with.

- **Show Some Empathy**

Your child can't really understand her feelings of anger or frustration at this age. But it's still a good idea to label these emotions for her. Try saying, "You must be so mad that Sam took the yellow bus," or, "I'll bet you're angry that Mommy won't let you climb onto the coffee table." At the same time, employing positive reinforcement -- such as praising your child when she shares a toy or uses a gentle touch -- will inspire better behavior down the road.

- **Try an Ounce of Prevention**

Make a mental note of the times when your toddler is most likely to melt down and strike out. (Usually this is just before bed or naptime, or when he's hungry.) Then if you begin to see his frustration level rising (it's the third time his block tower has tumbled), either offer to help or get him involved in a new activity. "Sometimes it just takes a little attention from Mom or Dad to help a child feel calmer -- which will make him less likely to hit or bite," says Dr. Shu.

- **Beware the Television**

The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends no TV for kids under the age of 2. While this is a challenging goal for most parents, it's important to monitor everything your child watches -- even cartoons -- to make sure the programs don't contain any violence. Researchers have found that children who are exposed to violent images in the media are more likely to be aggressive themselves.

- **Keep Your Own Emotions in Check**

As hard as it may be, don't let your temper boil over when your child hits or bites (or, for that matter, kicks or screams "No!" at the top of his lungs). Instead, remind yourself that this behavior is -- thankfully -- temporary. "Toddlers go through these stages for a month or two," says Dr. Turecki. "Anything that short-lived is usually nothing to worry about."

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When Your Child Is the Victim

Here's how to handle two common toddler tussles.

The Playdate Bully

One of your son's pals swats him -- in full view of you and the other mom.

What to do: "Hopefully, the other child's parent will step in and discipline him," says Dr. Jennifer Shu. "If she doesn't, it's okay for you

to say to the other child, 'We don't do that in our house,' then spend a few moments comforting your son." If the kids normally play well together, this could be a sign that they're getting tired or hungry, so it may be best to end the get-together.

The Daycare Terror

Your daughter comes home from daycare with a bite mark on her arm.

What to do: Ask your childcare provider what happened to your little one's arm, then find out how she handled the situation. "You need to make sure that she responded appropriately, such as by separating the children, and that she spoke to the other child's parents," says Dr. Shu. If this happens more than once or twice, however, consider switching daycare providers. It could be a sign that the children aren't being closely watched.

Don't You Hit, Either!

Even if you believe that spanking is appropriate discipline for an older child, you should never spank a 1-year-old.

"At this age, your child is developmentally unable to connect your hitting him -- however gently -- with anything that he may have done," explains Dr. Stanley Turecki.

What about putting your child in a time-out? Unfortunately, this may not be an effective method of discipline for a child under 2, since it's still too difficult for a toddler to connect the punishment with the crime.

"The best way to discipline a 1-year-old is to be swift and stern," says Dr. Jennifer Shu. "Promptly remove him from the situation; then let him know that hitting and biting are not okay."

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