



Challenging Behaviors / Biting

Challenging behaviors (including biting) can be stressful for families, but they are often a normal stage of development for infants and toddlers. Children exhibit these behaviors for many reasons, and most outgrow them as they develop language and self-regulation skills. Families of children who are injured often feel upset and worried, but it may surprise you that families of children who bite or hit are just as concerned - often mortified - and unsure why their child is behaving this way or how to prevent it in a childcare setting. Typically, their child does not exhibit those same behaviors at home, where there are more adults, less little people to interact with, less structure, and less transitions.

Challenging behaviors are developmentally appropriate, especially in group care settings. Biting, in particular, is common during the toddler years, and can often extend into the preschool years. While parents are often shocked to hear about biting in their child's classroom, child development specialists recognize it as a **typical behavior for this age group**.

The early childhood years (birth to age 8) are when children learn social-emotional skills. During this time, behaviors that adults perceive as challenging often occur because children are still learning to regulate emotions, communicate needs, and interact socially. Behaviors such as short tantrums, difficulty waiting, biting, or scratching are typical for toddlers and preschoolers, especially when language or coping skills are limited. These behaviors are considered challenging when they become persistent, intense, or significantly interfere with learning and social engagement. In many cases, challenging behaviors are simply the child's way of communicating needs. As language and coping skills grow, these behaviors usually decrease. Persistent, severe, or harmful behaviors require targeted intervention and support along with a strong partnership between parents and childcare providers.

What do challenging behaviors look like and where do they come from? Children may hit, kick, bite, throw toys, push, scream, grab, scratch, pinch, pull hair, yell, hide, or run when they experience big emotions or unmet needs. There are many reasons for a child to exhibit challenging behaviors. Here are some:

- When children have communication difficulties, limited verbal skills, or frustration.

- Children may struggle to manage strong emotions like anger, excitement, or fear and lack coping strategies for stress or disappointment.
- Sometimes, children explore cause-and-effect or seek sensory input, such as oral pressure, leading them to chew or mouth objects and biting is an extension of that.
- Others may seek adult attention or peer interaction but don't know how to ask, so they use physical actions instead of words. A child might want to join in group play but hasn't yet learned how to ask; instead, they may just walk up to the group and begin pushing others. A child might want the teacher's attention not know how to request that; instead they may begin biting or hitting the teacher or others.
- Overcrowded spaces, difficulty waiting, hunger, or fatigue can also trigger challenging behaviors.
- Stress from changes in routine or environment can lead children to seek comfort through behavior.

In those first years, there are very many reasons a very little person might bite or act out as a means of communication.

At Margaret's House, we use many strategies to prevent and address challenging behaviors but nothing will prevent all challenging behaviors. Our teachers build warm, responsive relationships and reinforce positive behaviors with descriptive praise, such as "You used gentle hands with your friend!" They teach protective skills like practicing responses with children such as "Stop, that hurts!" and encourage children to seek adult support. Teachers provide calm, consistent intervention and comfort for the hurt child, knowing that overreacting can worsen emotional harm and classroom tension. Predictable routines and consistent schedules reduce anxiety, while visual schedules, cues, timers, and songs help prepare children for transitions.

Teachers model and teach feeling words like happy, sad, or frustrated, and guide problem-solving and sharing. Books and stories are used to discuss emotions and empathy. Teachers teach alternative behaviors, such as showing children how to ask for a turn instead of grabbing, and providing opportunities to practice gentle hands. Classrooms offer engaging activities based on the Creative Curriculum, including sensory and motor experiences to meet children's needs. We meet physical needs with teething toys or chewy items for oral sensory stimulation and offer comfort and reassurance during stressful moments. Teachers reduce environmental stressors by arranging spaces that invite walking and sharing, rotating materials, and creating cozy corners to support children in managing big emotions or taking a break. Close supervision during transitions, group activities, and times when children are hungry or tired helps prevent incidents. However, **even with the closest supervision some behaviors can happen in an instant and are simply unavoidable despite every effort.** Please know that we take every precaution and always do our very best to minimize risks and prevent injuries both through proactive measures and close supervision, and we prioritize children's safety over staff safety.

We work hard to partner with families around challenging behaviors and find that strong partnerships help us avoid expulsion.

We avoid expulsion whenever possible because children who are expelled from childcare face negative consequences, including loss of opportunities to develop social-emotional skills, disrupted learning, increased family stress, and negative self-perception. Over time, expelled children may experience poor academic performance, future expulsions, disengagement, absenteeism, and even involvement with the juvenile justice system. Children affected by others' challenging behaviors typically experience less severe outcomes, such as bruising, broken skin, short-term stress, and temporary disruptions in peer interactions.

We also collaborate and partner with the Child Care Council and outside service providers to address those factors that we have influence on within the classroom. This includes professional development for our teaching staff, consultation with child development specialists on developmentally appropriate practices, connection with special needs behavioral specialists on providing additional proprioceptive and sensory choices along with other specialized changes or additions to the classroom, partnering with school districts to provide individualized specialized support to address specific needs, and outreach to reflective consultants to support teaching staff.

We also value confidentiality for our children and teachers here at Margaret's House. We are unable to discuss with parents the situation or details of a child that is not their own. Also, we are unable to discuss the specifics around our classroom management response, as both of those conversations would break the confidentiality that we are required to maintain.

What can families do at home? We suggest offering teething toys for very young children who are getting teeth or experiencing mouth pain. Also, using simple words to identify your emotions, and the likely emotion your child may be feeling in difficult moments. It is best to praise gentle and appropriate behaviors and encourage both positive interactions and communication skills.

Helping Children Feel Safe, Heard, and Supported If your child has witnessed or experienced physical aggression from another child, the first step for a parent is helping them feel safe, heard, and supported. Instead of prompting them to share or asking questions, let your child choose to share what happened at their own pace, and acknowledge their feelings with calm reassurance, such as "That sounds really scary" or "It makes sense that you feel upset," without rushing to problem-solve. Avoid pushing for details and acknowledge your child's feelings. Gently remind them that being hurt is never their fault and that it is always an adult's job to keep children safe.

You can also help your child practice simple self-advocacy skills, like saying "Stop, I don't like that," moving away and finding a trusted adult for help. If you see changes in your child's behavior, mood, or sleep, share any concerns with your healthcare provider, and/or your

child's teacher, so adults can work together to support them. Finally, help rebuild your child's confidence by focusing on their strengths, encouraging positive friendships, and reinforcing that childcare is a place where they are cared for, valued, and belong. Strong, supportive relationships buffer the impact of challenging experiences and help your child feel secure.

High-quality early childhood programs with strong teacher-child relationships and proactive behavior guidance can buffer negative effects and promote resilience. Our exceptional team of early childhood educators work together to provide high-quality care that supports strong social-emotional growth, and we look forward to partnering with you around your child's growth and learning.

Books about feelings

There are plenty of books about feelings and social emotional skills. Feel free to look around for some that you think will support your child. Here are some we have found:

- **The Way I Feel** — *Janan Cain*
Helps children identify and name emotions, reducing frustration-based behaviors.
- **When Sophie Gets Angry—Really, Really Angry** — *Molly Bang*
A powerful story about anger and healthy coping strategies.
- **When I Feel Angry** — *Cornelia Maude Spelman*
Another powerful story about anger and healthy coping strategies.
- **Hands Are Not for Hitting** — *Martine Agassi*
Teaches replacement behaviors in a gentle, developmentally appropriate way.
- **Calm Down Time** — *Elizabeth Verdick*
A toddler-friendly book that mirrors Tucker Turtle's "calm down" steps.
- **No, David!** — *David Shannon*
Helps children understand boundaries and expected behaviors through humor.
- **A Little Spot of Empathy** — *Diane Alber*
Helps children understand and respond to others' emotions.
- **When I Feel Scared** — *Cornelia Maude Spelman*
Supports children who feel uneasy after witnessing big behaviors.
- **The Invisible String** — *Patrice Karst*
Builds emotional security and connection — helpful after witnessing distress.
- **Kindness Makes Us Strong** — *Sophie Beer*
Reinforces prosocial responses when peers are upset.
- **How Do You Feel?** — *Anthony Browne*
Helps children identify emotions in others — a key Pyramid Model skill.