

Managing Challenging Behaviour

An expert guide to toddler behaviour for healthcare professionals

Healthcare professionals play an important part in helping parents of toddlers (1-3 years) respond to challenging behaviour



by Joanna Fortune, *Clinical Psychotherapist & Attachment specialist*

Key Learnings

1. **Everyone grows and develops at different rates.**

Toddlers have to negotiate through various stages as they move through childhood and beyond. Understanding these phases enables healthcare professionals to be in sync with the stage of development, thus making any interventions as effective as possible.

2. **Biting is one of a range of challenging behaviours.**

In order to help parents respond to biting behaviour, it's vital to understand the stage the toddler is at, not where they are expected to be developmentally.

3. **Shine a light on the behaviour.**

The best way to support parents to respond to challenging behaviour is by showing what the behaviour is communicating, and providing practical tools to respond to it.

Biting: communication or aggression?

Infants understand biting as a form of exploration. It is a primitive behaviour not linked to causing pain in others. As soon as a baby is old enough to realize they have hands and teeth, they will experiment with what they can do with them. At this stage it is playful communication, not aggressive behaviour. It is the baby's job to experiment and

a parent's job to teach them how to use their hands and teeth in a positive way, singled out or valued above any other part of a meal or snack. Healthy home-prepared meals and snacks which are provided in a relaxed and happy home environment aren't any better for the addition of treats.

Toddlers see biting as a form of communication. It communicates frustration while learning social language and self-control skills. Toddlers will often bite and hit with little or no regard for consequences. This is largely due to the fact that they have not yet developed a cognitive understanding of cause and effect, and also because when they hit and bite at this age it is done to express how they are feeling and not with the conscious intent of causing the recipient pain. Of course, biting and hitting does cause pain to others and parents must start to teach a toddler how to correct these behaviours as early as possible. Toddlers are still learning about themselves and the world around them, they don't yet have the grasp of full expressive language or emotional vocabulary to say how they feel. They cannot explain when they feel overwhelmed, confused or hyper-stimulated, so they will express it the only way they know how: behaviourally.

Pre-schoolers use biting as a form of control/defence/frustration. It exerts control over a situation; gains attention; acts as a self-defence strategy; or comes out of extreme frustration and anger. Frequent biting after a child turns three, however, may indicate other behaviour problems, because by that time many children have the communication skills necessary to relate their needs without biting.

If a parent takes the time to understand what is behind the behaviour, they can help their toddler to understand what is going on by naming it for them: e.g. "I can see that you are tired and hungry because we have been busy all day and it is nearly dinner time and this is making you feel cross/angry with your sister. It is not ok to hit your sister. We will be home for dinner in a few minutes but I wonder if we can all play a game of I-Spy until we get there?"

QUICK TIP FOR PARENTS

1

Take a moment and reflect on what may be behind the acting-out behaviour:
is your toddler tired?
Hungry?
Over-stimulated?

Responding to challenging behaviour

- Parents must tell their toddler what they want or expect them to do, as opposed to just saying what they are not to do. Telling them what they don't want merely risks inadvertently reinforcing the negative behaviour without giving me a positive alternative.
- Never assume that a toddler know what a parent wants from them, especially if the situation hasn't been explained. What is obvious to an adult is not obvious to a toddler.

- Express the desired action up front.
- Use modelling behaviour as necessary.
- Consistency that is developmentally appropriate and offered clearly and calmly is the key to success.

QUICK TIP FOR PARENTS

2

Help your toddler by naming the behaviour, then use distraction to redirect their focus.

Responding to challenging behaviour: Check list for parents

1. Use your toddler's name.
2. Meet them at their eye-level.
3. Speak calmly.
4. Be very clear about what you mean.
For example, 'Jamie, sit in the chair' instead of, 'Jamie, if you stand in the chair you might fall and hurt yourself'.
5. Avoid conflict by using the second chance system.
6. Stay consistent in your responses.

Four principles

Four principles for changing negative behaviour

1. Behaviours that are reinforced are strengthened and more likely to be repeated.
2. Behaviours that are not reinforced are weakened and less likely to be repeated.
3. Behaviours that are punished are also weakened and less likely to be repeated.
4. The most efficient strategy for eliminating misbehaviour is to reinforce a competing behaviour that makes the target misbehaviour impossible.

To avoid conflict, parents can employ a *do-over* or second chance system, so that when the toddler misbehaves they can have a second chance to get it right. If they get it right the second time, praise them and move on without reference to the misbehaviour first time.

1. Parents should avoid using the phrase ‘don’t hit’ and then punishing the thing they do not want to see their toddler do. Instead, they should:
2. Focus on helping their toddler understand the feeling behind the behaviour.
3. State the boundary on what is not okay.
4. Redirect them to a more positive alternative for expressing their feeling.

Suitable articles for parents on this topic are available at www.toddlebox.ie/behaviour

QUICK TIP FOR PARENTS

3

Use the **ACT** tool:

Acknowledge the feeling. ‘I know you’re angry ‘cos you can’t have what you want.’

Communicate the limit. ‘I am not for hitting’.

Target the alternative behaviour. ‘If you want to hit something, you can hit this cushion.’

1. **AUTHOR:** Joanna Fortune, MICP, MIFPP, CTTTS, Reg Pract APPI, Ap Sup PTI, Clinical Psychotherapist and Attachment specialist, Solamh Parent Child Relationship Clinic.