

A RECIPE FOR ADDRESSING Hitting, Biting & Aggression

Serves: 1 upset preschooler | Prep time: ongoing, all year | Best made calmly

INGREDIENTS

- A calm, low voice (your most important tool)
- Eye-level body position
- Simple, consistent language for limits
- A quiet, non-punitive cool-down spot
- Words to offer the child (“hands are for playing”)
- A plan for the child who was hurt
- Visuals outlining skills and steps for transitions

PREP (BEFORE IT HAPPENS)

- Notice each child's triggers: tired, hungry, overstimulated, transitions
- Teach replacement words/skills during calm moments, not just after incidents
- Narrate feelings all day: “You look frustrated”
- Pre-warn transitions (“5 more minutes”)
- Agree with co-teachers on one shared approach

DIRECTIONS (IN THE MOMENT)

- 1. Ensure safety first** — Calmly step in, separate the children, and use a physical block if needed (i.e., stand between the students so they can't keep hitting or kicking each other). No lecture yet.
Why this works: In the heat of the moment, the child's alarm system (fight/flight) is driving the behavior, not reasoning. Your job is to be an external regulator of safety before anything else — words won't stop a body that's already in fight mode. Your calm and steady leadership is what will slowly diffuse the situation.
- 2. Attend to the hurt child then the other child** — Give the hurt child attention and comfort first — this is not about ignoring the other child, it's about priority. Then acknowledge the other child who used distress behavior (e.g., “I'm going to check on our hurt friend then I will come to you. I'm going to help you both.”)
Why this works: Comforting helps the hurt child's nervous system down-regulate quickly, and it models for both children that distress reliably gets a caring response — a core building block of felt safety. Acknowledging both kids also sends the signal that no one is “bad” or does not belong.
- 3. Name it simply** — Get to the distressed student's eye level and use language of noticing with a few words: “I see your hands moving quickly. You seem mad.” Keep language simple, describing without judgement.
Why this works: A dysregulated or still-activated brain can't process complex language. Short, concrete statements are more likely to be heard than explanations, and eye-level contact signals connection rather than confrontation.
- 4. Stay matter-of-fact** — Avoid shaming, big reactions, or forced apologies. Your calm signals safety, not disinterest. Monitor your facial expressions so they are gentle and not judgmental.
Why this works: A big emotional reaction from you (anger, alarm) adds another stress signal to an already activated child, often escalating rather than resolving the moment. Neutral affect helps their nervous system settle instead of spike further.
- 5. Help them reset** — Offer the cool-down spot as a place to feel better, not a punishment: “Let's help your body calm down.” This is part of co-regulation (staff with student) and should not be presented as time-out.
Why this works: Bodies, not just minds, need to come back down from a stress-hormone surge. Framing the space as support rather than exile or banishment from the group keeps the child's stress response from re-triggering out of fear or shame.

6. **Teach the replacement** — Once calm, briefly coach the alternative: "When you're mad, you can say "Stop or come find me." After the event, just briefly coach or model. Practice the replacement more concretely later than day or the next day when the student is fully calm and happily engaged.

***Why this works:** New skills can only be learned and retained once the thinking brain (prefrontal cortex) is back online — which only happens after the body has settled. Teaching too early doesn't stick and typically retriggers a stress cycle.*

7. **Reconnect** — Close the loop with a warm, brief moment of connection so the relationship stays intact.

***Why this works:** A secure relationship with a calm adult is itself co-regulating. Ending on connection (not lingering discipline) reinforces that the child is safe and still cared for, which supports long-term self-regulation.*

CHEF'S NOTES

- Avoid: long lectures, forced "I'm sorry," time-out, shaming, comparing children.
- Consistency matters more than severity — same response, every time, from every adult. Calm and steadiness from adults is what allows children's developing brains to learn.
- Document patterns (time of day, trigger, context) to share with support staff and families.
- If aggression is frequent or intensifying, loop in your director/behavior specialist early.

THE SCIENCE IN BRIEF

- Hitting and biting are almost always impulse-control failures under stress, not premeditated 'bad behavior' — young children's inhibitory control is still developing.
- A child in an activated state cannot access their reasoning brain — lectures and "Why did you do that?" questions need to be avoided. Follow-up with problem solving later, not in the moment.
- A calm, attuned adult response is co-regulating: it helps settle the child's nervous system so learning becomes possible again.
- Repeated calm, consistent responses — over time — are what build a child's own capacity for impulse control and self-regulation. Children learn and develop skills through this process NOT from punishment.

INSTEAD OF SAYING...	TRY SAYING...
"Hey! We don't hit!"	"Hands down." (said with a leveled voice, not yelling)
"Why are you doing that?!"	"Let's pause. I will help you."
"That's bad!."	"You are upset. Let's find a place to calm down."
"How many times do I need to tell you not to do that?!."	"It's hard to remember. Let's try again."
"Your friends won't want to play with you."	"Let's try that again."
"No throwing!!"	"Blocks are for building."

