Managing children’s challenging behaviour - biting

This information sheet provides insights into why your child might bite, how your child’s education and care service may respond to biting incidents, and what you can do to help.

It’s important to know that biting is sometimes an unavoidable behaviour for young children, and is not necessarily an indication that there is something wrong. When thinking about biting, remember to focus on both the biter as well as who has been bitten. It’s important to know how you can help in both situations.

Why does biting occur?

There are various reasons including:

- teething children like to bite down on something to soothe their gums
- young children often use their mouths to explore and investigate their world
- young children are still developing their self-control, and may be impulsive
- children are learning to read the feelings and behaviour of others, and understand which behaviours are acceptable
- boredom
- young children expressing frustration.

Young children may express frustration by biting when they are:

- tired or unwell
- unable to do something or have something they want
- required to share or take turns
- feeling that another child is interfering in their game or activity
- waiting for something and feeling impatient
- unable to communicate verbally with those around them
- seeking attention from others.

How do educators at your education and care service respond to a biting incident?

Educators work conscientiously to resolve and minimise biting incidents. They are committed to stopping biting, using a wide range of strategies developed for individual children.

Knowing each child well helps educators have an idea about what may be causing them to bite, and identify their specific triggers for biting. This helps them take steps to prevent the behaviour and avoid or minimise these triggers.

Educators use different strategies according to their understanding and analysis of the biting incidents.

- A child who bites when overly excited in a group setting may be encouraged to sit with an educator at a quiet activity, to support them to understand and self-regulate their emotions and move back into the group play successfully.
- Providing small group and one-on-one play opportunities for children may reduce incidents of biting.
- Having a consistent approach to promote positive behaviour in the education and care service.
- Educators ensure that biting behaviour is not reinforced while also giving the message that children who have bitten are still valued and will be supported.
• Educators support children’s behaviour and avoid making them feel ashamed or embarrassed.

• Educators provide opportunities for children to learn positive behaviours in group settings by encouraging children to invite others into play and supporting them in engaging with other children, for example, using their words to ask for a toy that another child has.

• Educators support each child to develop strategies to stop a child biting, for example teaching children to say ‘stop, I don’t like it’, to a child who may be trying to bite them.

• Supervision plans and strategies.

Educators have a responsibility to inform you about biting incidents that involve your child, either if your child is biting or has been bitten. The service should keep the name of the child biting confidential from other families, including the family of any child that may have been bitten.

• An incident form should be completed and shared with you, outlining what occurred, and should be given to you with some discussion on the strategies the service has developed to stop it reoccurring.

• They may also discuss with you your perspective on the biting behaviour and any experience of it occurring outside of the service.

How can you help your child?

If you’re with your child when they bite, remove them from the situation or the activity, and remind them that it is not acceptable. Tell them calmly, “We don’t bite our friends/others, biting hurts.” Avoid giving them a consequence or punish them.

Talking with your child about biting, and how it makes the other person feel, is a great place to begin to help your child understand what has happened. You may also want to find out why your child is biting. Observe them and develop an understanding of situations that may lead to biting. You may also provide your child with a teething ring or toys that they can bite on.

If your child bites while at their education and care service, it’s important to work in partnership with the educators to ensure a clear and consistent is used. You will all need to support your child to learn to express their feelings using words. Be reassured that the educators will be working to support children learn positive behaviours as alternatives to biting. It is important to remember that biting is not your or the educator’s fault. Biting is common in toddlers and can sometimes be unavoidable when in a group environment.

You can also refer to our factsheet on developing children’s positive behaviour in education and care service for tips.