

Managing Behaviour: Biting

Biting is a form of aggression, and is particularly common among toddlers.

Biting seems to evoke very strong reactions from adults, for a number of reasons, however we need to remember to view biting as it is; a form of aggression (just like hitting, hair pulling or throwing toys).

Educators in child care settings often experience high levels of stress in response to biting due to a number of reasons, including:

- Biting can be viewed as somewhat primitive
- Concern about potential infections transmitted through body fluids
- Educators are fearful of explaining the incident to the other child's parents

Managing When Biting Occurs

When we are managing an aggressive behaviour, such as biting, we are essentially teaching the child a new skill. We know that behavioural change involves physical changes in the brain; therefore it certainly won't happen overnight. The child has potentially been using this strategy to have their needs met for months (or even years); therefore we cannot expect that they will abandon this strategy quickly.

Remember that it takes time and repetition to support the child to develop a new skill.

1. Identify Potential Reasons for the Behaviour (Biting)

Let's consider the behaviour using the Iceberg Model (image right); biting is 'above the surface' and is the observable behaviours and actions.

However, it is important to consider what is happening 'below the surface'; the underlying reasons driving the behaviours; feelings and needs. This is what we don't see.

Where does this behaviour come from? (Consider; lack of skill, lack of self-regulation skills, irritated nervous system, trauma, etc.)

It can be useful to document the child's behaviour for a period of time in order to gain a better understanding of when/why this behaviour occurs; For example during mealtimes a time of day when the child may be tired.



2. Prevent the Behaviour from Occurring

Ensure that the child is engaging in activities and has access to equipment that is both stimulating, and provides opportunity for the child to succeed.

Consider the routines within the care environment; if a clear pattern has emerged as a result of the observations, it might be beneficial to consider flexibility within the routines. For example, Educators could consider an earlier sleep time or providing indoor/outdoor play.

Provide additional support during 'high-risk' times, such as scaffolding peer interactions if this has been identified as an area in which the child requires additional support.

Remember that these behavioural changes won't happen overnight; therefore it is unlikely that you will prevent all incidents of biting using these strategies alone. Repetition, repetition, repetition.

3. Teach the Child a New Skill

In order to support the child to abandon this behaviour, we need to teach him/her a more pro-social way of having his needs met; for example, providing children with simple phrases to use, such as "No," "Stop," or "My turn?" For children who are non-verbal, we could teach simple signs to all children within the care environment to ensure that they can effectively communicate their needs with Educators and their peers.

4. Provide Positive Reinforcement

Provide positive reinforcement when the children are practicing these skills throughout social interactions. Remember that it is important to be as specific as possible when providing praise so the children are aware of which behaviours you are reinforcing.

5. Manage Adult Responses

Communicate with parents about the behaviours (biting) and the approach you are taking to manage it; teaching the children alternative skills.

Ensure that Educators are engaging in frequent reflective discussions regarding the challenging behaviours and trends within the care environment; sharing their experiences and reflecting on their current practice.

It is important to ensure that all educators are responding consistently.

6. Seek Support

If you are still concerned about these behaviours, perhaps encourage the child's parents to seek support from an Allied Health Professional.