

## **Biting Project**



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## **Introduction**

In today's society childcare providers are experiencing a high prevalence of challenging behaviours within their settings. Biting is one of these challenging behaviours and at present there is little information for childcare providers on how to manage this challenging behaviour. This resource was developed as a guide to offer information and support to childcare providers on how to manage biting within early childhood settings in Ireland.

## **Biting Overview**

- A child often bites other children and this is common in childhood.
- Biting is considered a normal stage of child development.
- Not all children bite.
- Biting is one of the most difficult challenging behaviours to manage within early childhood settings.
- Biting emerges in childhood around the toddler age group as children at this stage of development do not have the appropriate skills to communicate and do not have the cognitive ability to understand that biting another child is not an appropriate behaviour (Legg, 1993).
- Biting can happen within any childcare service and when biting happens it can be scary, frustrating and stressful for children, childcare staff and parents (Greenman and Stonehouse, 1994).

## **Why Children Bite**

- Biting can happen for different reasons depending on children's circumstances, but by looking at why biting is happening (NCNA, 2011), the childcare staff can put measures in place to reduce biting.
- Biting can occur for the following reasons such as frustration, lack of communication skills, imitation, teething, exploration, developing social skills (Reguero de Atilas, 1997), lack of self control, attention, excitement, over-stimulation (Greenman and Stonehouse, 1994), tiredness, causes and effect (Stephens, 2008), lack of routine, competition for toys and adult attention (Greenman, 1995).

## **How staff should manage biting behaviour within childcare services**

### **1. Observations**

- It is important that childcare staff observe a child who is biting over a period of time to find the reason of why a child is biting.
- Observations should observe children's behaviour and conditions that lead to the biting incident (Stephens, 2008), where it happened, what precipitated the biting (if anything), who was involved (a particular child or children) and time of day in which the incident happened (Legg, 1993).

### **2. Do not reinforce the biting behaviour**

- When a child is biting focus your attention on the bitten child (Sparrow, 2008).
- When the child who was bitten is cared for using the first aid box and settled, get down to the biting child's level and use appropriate verbal and non verbal language depending on the stage of developmental (Greenberg, 2004). Use two word sentences maximum and be firm. For example: 'not nice'

### **3. Reinforce the child's positive behaviours**

- When the child who is biting is involved in activities or play scenarios and not biting use positive reinforcement to support positive behaviours.
- Reward for the positive behaviour that childcare staff want to see (Greenburg, 2004).
- Positive Reinforcement is an event which follows a pleasant response and increases its probability of happening again (Coon, 2004, p. 300).
- A positive reinforcement should be something extra which the child does not have access to.

## **Example of a positive reinforcement menu for a child who is biting**

Define the behaviour you want a child to do. For example, everytime .....plays with a toy and does not bite a person within a two minute timeframe he/she will get one of the following reinforcement:

### Tactile

- A squeeze of a rubber ball for one minute
- Run hands under flowing water for one minute
- Cosy cushion for one minute
- Pouring of sand over his/her arm for one minute

### Visual

- Favourite book for one minute
- Photo of family for one minute
- Bubbles for one minute
- Disco ball for one minute

### Edible

- Slice of apple
- Piece of pineapple
- A raisin
- A grape
- 3 corn flakes

### Social:

- Mexican wave
- Jump for joy
- Thumbs up
- High Five
- Round of Applause

#### 4. Changes to the room environment

- Children's routines and play resources should be changed and updated on a regular basis so that children do not become bored or frustrated.
- If a routine/resources within a preschool service is not enticing to a child this may lead to biting.
- Have plenty of duplicated play equipment/resources so children do not have to be involved in parallel play.
- Children at toddler age are at the stage of development where they can only see things from their point of view and find it difficult to share.

## **Preventative strategies to reduce biting**

- Do not label children as biters (Greenberg, 2004).
- Watch for triggers to biting.
- Constantly observe children who might bite (NCNA, 2011).
- When you think a child is going to bite intervene by redirecting the child to another play activity/area (Greenman, 1995).
- Devise a key worker system so staff members shadow potential biters (Legg, 1993).
- Keep a predictable routine to limit boredom and frustration (Greenman, 1995).

## **Children with intellectual disabilities or special needs/ requirements**

- Many childcare services in Ireland have children attending who have intellectual disabilities or special needs/requirements.
- Children with intellectual disabilities or special needs/requirements do show challenging behaviours such as biting.
- Children who bite and have intellectual disabilities or special needs/requirements mainly bite due to frustration because they cannot verbally communicate what they may want or need.

## **How to manage children who bite with intellectual disability or special needs/requirements**

1. Introduce the Picture Exchange Communication System (PECS).
- This method of communication relies on visual based communication rather than verbal language (Charlop et al, 2008).
  - Customise PECS for individual children based on their daily lives, interests and routines.

- Children can point to a picture or physically hand an image to a childcare staff member to tell them what they want to do and vice versa.
2. Introduce Lamh.
- Lamh is based on the Irish Sign Language (Lamh, 2011).
  - Lamh is a manual sign system which children with intellectual disabilities and special needs can be taught so that they can communicate (Lamh, 2011).
  - Speech is always used with lamh so the children can see and hear what is communicated (Lamh, 2011).

### **Epidemic Biting - Overview**

- When biting changes from an unusual occurrence to an occurrence of a couple of times a day or weeks this is known as an epidemic or a health emergency (Greenman, 1995).
- Measures need to be taken to protect the well being of children and childcare staff within the service.

### **Protective Measures**

- Staff members meet with preschool provider/manager daily for advice and support throughout this crisis (Greenman, 1995).
- Involve all staff within the service and ask for positive suggestions on how to manage this biting epidemic.
- Data collection - record every occurrence along with the location, time, children involved, circumstances, behaviours and staff present (NCNA, 2011).
- Keep written records of staff responses to ensure that the appropriate attention and action is given to the bitten child and the child who is biting.
- Analyse the biting occurrences to see if there is pattern in the behaviour.
- Shadow the child who is biting and anticipate when the biting is going to happen and redirect the child's attention (Legg, 1993).

- Consider early transitions to and from activities for the child who is biting and use verbal and nonverbal communication as well as visual aids to assist with transitions (Greenman, 1995).
- Partnership with parents/guardians is crucial. Involve them in this process, offer advice and be open to positive suggestions from parents.
- **Never** tell parents the name of the child who is biting. Reassure parents that you are doing your utmost to resolve the biting epidemic.
- Ask the parents/guardians of the child who is biting for information about the child when he/she is not in the crèche. By getting information about the child's behaviour outside the crèche a reason why the child is biting may become apparent.

### **What to do if childcare staff cannot manage a child who is biting**

- **Never** exclude a child from a service because staff members cannot manage a biting behaviour.
- Involve the parents/ guardians of the child who is biting.
- Set up a programme of care and reintroduce the child back into the childcare service.
- Get the parent/guardian to stay in the childcare service with the child for short periods of time then gradually increase the time the child and parent/guardian stay in the service.
- The purpose of this is to get the child who is biting to stop biting and gradually the parent/ guardian will spend less time in the service and finally the child will be able to attend the service on their own.

## Summary

- Biting is a natural developmental stage children go through.
- Toddlers bite because they do not have the verbal skills to communicate.
- All children bite for different reasons.
- Four key areas in order to manage biting in childcare services:
  - Observations
  - Do not reinforce the biting behaviour
  - Reinforce positive behaviours - reinforcement menu
  - Changes to the room environment
- Have preventative measures in place to manage biting.
- Children with intellectual disabilities and special needs/requirements do also bite.
- Childcare services should be inclusive and have a programme of care to manage biting for children with intellectual disabilities and special needs/ requirements.
  - PECS
  - Lamh
- Biting Epidemic – when biting changes from an unusual occurrence to a usual occurrence.
- Protective measures – support from owner/manager, data collection, recording staff responses, analyse the data and partnership with parents.
- What to do if childcare staff cannot manage a child who is biting – involve parents/guardians and set up a programme of care for reintegrating the child back into the service.

Compiled by Jason Nelis 3rd year degree student in BA (Hons) Early Childhood Studies in Dundalk Institute of Technology, on behave of the Health Service Executive while on work placement with County Louth Preschool Inspection Team.

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