

# MANAGING CHILDREN'S BEHAVIOUR

Supporting children's social and emotional development in the early years, we look at some of the common early childhood behaviours adults find most difficult to understand, and how conflicts can be best managed to encourage and support each child's social and emotional development in the most appropriate way.

Some behaviours, although frustrating for adults, form part of children's normal development. For example, very young children may repeatedly bang and throw objects as they learn how things work and move. They also may test out their developing vocal cords and other people's responses to their high pitched screams and shouts. Generally, young children move on quite quickly from both these stages. However as they get older, they may start to exhibit more aggressive behaviours such as hitting or kicking because they are struggling to communicate or get something they want.

It is perfectly natural and healthy for a certain amount of boisterous and even conflict play to happen in early years settings, especially as children start to explore the world and people around them and learn cause and effect. However, it is less than ideal when that behaviour means that children start to hurt one another.

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However, sometimes adult's body language is not in sync with their other actions and even very young children will pick up on facial expressions and tone of voice, so care must be taken to not give out mixed messages, which confuse the child.

There are some behaviours in early years settings which are more difficult to deal with and will take some careful consideration and action.

## **Biting — what to do when a child bites another child**

As with other behaviours, biting has a function for the child and in very young children it could be for a range of reasons, which includes:

- exploration and stimulation
- to relieve teething pains
- to avoid or gain something
- to vent frustration
- to communicate
- to show excitement and affection
- copying another child (or adult)
- because it feels good

When a child bites another child (or adult) then this should be stopped immediately. The first and immediate response from an adult is usually alarm and they may quickly snatch the child away.

However, the best way to respond to an incident is to be composed, gently but firmly remove the child who has given the bite, tell that child not to bite, and comfort the child who has been bitten.

It is usually very young children who bite and once they have bitten they are more likely to repeat the behaviour again, so vigilance and anticipation is essential to avoid situations arising, especially when young children cannot yet use words to express themselves.

Close attention to the child and the practitioner's own behaviour at this early stage reduces the likelihood of it happening again. Older children understand the consequences of their actions, what behaviour is unacceptable and why, but they may still need to be reminded occasionally. Parents also need consistent advice on responding to biting; unorthodox approaches such as biting children back, which are commonly discussed in online forums, must be challenged by practitioners as abusive and in fact more likely to reinforce the unwanted behaviour.

## **Sexualised behaviours in children — how best to deal with this**

Sometimes children exhibit sexualised behaviours which do not appear to embarrass the child or other children but certainly make the adults feel uncomfortable. Sex and sexuality form part of our normal development, and associated behaviour starts to emerge at a very early age. In the early years this behaviour includes:

- kissing and hugging
- showing curiosity about private body parts
- talking about private body parts and using words like poo, willy and bum
- playing 'house' or 'doctors and nurses' type games with other children
- touching, rubbing or showing off their genitals or masturbating as a comforting habit

With regard to behaviours that adults would consider to be inappropriate in public, children with good comprehension can be told that these actions are very private and should not be done in the setting. Adults should not humiliate or embarrass a child but simply guide them as to what is acceptable social behaviour. This behaviour should be monitored to check that it forms part of normal development and childhood curiosity.

However, if the behaviour continues and the child shows a lack of inhibition, then these may be signs that indicate a safeguarding concern. Even if there is some uncertainty about this behaviour, safeguarding procedures should always be followed.

## **Swearing — how to respond when a young child swears**

Swearing is always a particular concern and one that causes much anxiety for practitioners and parents.

When young children first start to talk it is not unusual for them to occasionally use a term which is socially unacceptable, such as a swear word. In very young children this may be because they are pronouncing a word incorrectly or because they have heard an adult use the term. Most young children will not understand the meaning of the offensive word but may continue to use it if using the word initiates a response from adults.

It is possible that the child has said a swear word that they have heard used elsewhere. The best way to avoid this happening again is to ignore it because even if it is repeated the child will soon tire if there is no reaction.

However, it is difficult to ignore a child using a word or gesture which is highly offensive and/or is repeatedly used in a busy setting. If the child is able to understand that a gesture or word is hurtful or offensive then it should be explained to the child that the word should not be used. If the child is younger and unable to understand rules of acceptable behaviour then the key person should consult directly with the parents to agree a consistent approach, both at home and in the setting, for example, ignoring use of the word, distracting the child and checking the use of language around the child.

## **Bullying — can a three-year-old ever be a bully?**

Bullying is another behaviour that parents and practitioners worry about. Bullying can be defined as a deliberate, aggressive and repeated action, which is carried out with intent to cause harm or distress to others. However, bullying requires the child to have a higher level of reasoning and thinking than most three-year-olds have developed. Therefore an outburst by a three-year-old is more likely to be a reflection of the child's emotional well-being, their stage of development or a behaviour that they have copied from someone else.

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Young children are keen observers and more likely to copy behaviours, mimicking the actions of others, especially the actions of people they have established a relationship with. These are learnt behaviours rather than premeditated behaviours because children this young do not have sufficiently sophisticated cognition to carry out the type of bullying an older child might engage in.

However, unless addressed early, this type of behaviour in young children can lead on to bullying behaviour later in childhood. But by labelling a child as a bully so early in life we risk influencing negative perceptions and expectations of the child which will impact on their self image, self-esteem and may adversely affect their long term behaviour. Bullying labels can stick with the child for the rest of their life.

If any of these types of behaviours continue to occur, the key person should consult with the parents and the setting's SENCO to find suitable solutions and support as soon as possible.