

# Spitting and Swearing

## Why do young children spit and swear?



### A child might spit or swear to:

- Explore cause and effect (“*What happens when I spit/swear?*”).
- Satisfy a need for oral-motor stimulation or other sensory stimulation (spit).
- Imitate other children and adults.
- Feel strong and in control.
- Communicate or express difficult feelings, such as frustration, anger, confusion or fear (“*There are too many people here and I feel cramped*”).

## Strategies

**While every situation is different, here are some general guidelines for responding when a child spits or swears. It’s important to act as a detective and unpick the behaviour – we need to understand the cause to help us choose the best preventative method.**

### Environment and Resources



- **Offer materials that allow your child to relax** and release tension. Offer play dough, foam balls, bubbles, soft music.
- **Use a mirror** to make silly faces into sticking tongue out, pretending to be an animal, roar etc.
- **Provide a social story** to clearly explain why we do not spit or swear i.e. “*sometimes I get mad or angry. I might try to spit/swear others. Spitting/Swearing is not ok. Spitting/Swearing hurts others feelings. If I am angry I can squeeze the red ball etc..*” Try to read this with the child when they are calm and not emotionally overwhelmed.
- Redirect the child to their chewy/cloth when you notice they might spit at someone. Use clear language ‘bite chewy’.
- Use visuals for ‘stop’ and ‘no spitting/swearing’ to reinforce meaning (*right*).



### Activities



- Offer activities that allow your child to relax and release tension. Some children like yoga or deep breathing. Offer activities such as [disco dough](#), blowing feathers or bubbles, and painting on paper to use the mouth muscles.
- Try oral motor activities to wake up the senses (massaging the cheeks, jaw and mouth using circular motions, blowing bubbles, straws for drinking or experimenting with different food textures i.e crunchy carrots, cereal or crackers). Find more ideas on the [Sirona Care and Health website](#).
- Try using a Persona Doll (puppet) to de-personalise the situation and help the child think about how to solve the problem. Discuss how the child can respond in similar situations in the future (at their level of understanding).
- Encourage positive touch activities with peers (e.g. lotion on skin) – aim to offer smaller groups to facilitate this.

## Interactions



- Have age-appropriate expectations for your child's behaviour based on their current skills and abilities. Check all adults know the expectations and all respond to spitting/swearing in the same way, you may want to look at your policy for guidance.
- Teach coping techniques to the child to choose an appropriate outlet (you can do this using a choosing board) i.e when I feel.....I can use....and then I will feel....
- Think about your tone of voice to avoid the situation escalating. Shouting across the room is not helpful. You can adopt a non-confrontational approach by singing or whispering i.e. *'Can Bob wave his hands, wave his hands, wave his hands'*. When the child is waving then they are not spitting/swearing and you can redirect.
- If you see the incident, move quickly to the scene and get down to children's level. It's important to address the situation to enable children to understand the rules and boundaries but don't overreact as this can inadvertently encourage the behaviour.
- In a serious, firm tone make a strong statement: *"We don't use that word."*. Next, offer a choice: *"You can help make Josie feel better, or you can sit quietly until I can talk with you."* Help the child follow through on the choice if necessary.
- Reinforce positive behaviour by acknowledging the child's appropriate words and actions (*"You didn't like being tickled so you used your words to ask me to stop"*).
- Teach the child words for setting limits, such as "stop" or "that's mine."
- Focus on supporting 'fun shared experiences' with peers (activities with adult and 1 to 2 other peers). Offer adult-led activity planned several times per day to encourage these social skills. These activities could be loud, messy, big, funny/ surprising! Try to link in with the child's interests.

## What else



- Observe your child to learn where, when, and in what situations it occurs. Pay attention to signals and step in if the child seems ready to spit/swear.
- Discuss with parents/carers what is happening and if it is happening at home. Agree a planned response with parents to enable a consistent approach.

## Useful links

[Dingley's Promise](#) – online training module (Behaviour that Challenges)

[Ordinarily Available Provision](#), Bristol's Local SEND Offer

