# RESPONDING TO STUDENTS WHO SPIT

## KEY MESSAGES

* Follow the guidance issued to schools by the department for school operations for remote and on-site teaching.
* A student intentionally spitting at, or on, others at school is considered problem or challenging behaviour.
* Spitting may constitute [occupational violence and aggression](https://www2.education.vic.gov.au/pal/occupational-violence-and-aggression-schools/policy). Refer to reporting requirements in [eduSafe](https://www2.education.vic.gov.au/pal/reporting-and-managing-school-incidents-including-emergencies/policy).
* When a student spits at another person, the priority is to ensure everyone’s safety, and support the student through the behavioural episode.
* Staff should respond to a student who spits as they typically would for any student exhibiting a challenging behaviour.

## DEFINITION OF SPITTING

Spitting is when saliva is forcibly expelled from the mouth or flicked from the mouth with fingers. Spitting can be voluntary, purposeful (with a function), or be an involuntary action.

Drooling, also known as poor saliva control or dribbling, is when saliva flows outside the mouth. Drooling is sometimes observed in students with cerebral palsy, intellectual disability and other neurological difficulties. How and when we produce saliva is not within our conscious control. Drooling is usually the result of inefficient control of salivary secretions. Profuse drooling can wet clothing, hands, and objects.

Schools should use standard precautions when providing routine care for a student that drools. Schools should follow the advice issued by the Department about the use of personal protective equipment (PPE). Refer to [Saliva Control in Children](https://www.rch.org.au/uploadedFiles/Main/Content/plastic/salivabook.pdf) (PDF) for more information.

## INTENTIONAL SPITTING

Intentionally spitting at, or on, others at school is considered problem or challenging behaviour. Depending on the circumstances, it may also constitute occupational violence and aggression and require reporting in [eduSafe](https://www2.education.vic.gov.au/pal/reporting-and-managing-school-incidents-including-emergencies/policy).

Staff should respond to a student who spits as they typically would for any student exhibiting challenging behaviour:

* Ensure everyone’s safety and implement appropriate hygiene control measures.
* For a student with a history of spitting, follow the student’s Behaviour Support Plan (BSP) which outlines ways to support the student to not spit.
* For a student that has begun spitting, develop a BSP, to understand and respond to the behaviour. The BSP must address the function of the behaviour to be effective.

## UNDERSTANDING THE FUNCTION OF SPITTING

Understanding the function of the spitting is to understand its purpose:

* Is it to escape something: reduced attention, academic demands?
* Is it to gain something: social attention, interruption of task demands, access to something the student can touch (e.g. an object)?
* Does it produce a positive bodily or emotional sensation for the student?

Understanding the function of the spitting behaviour helps determine the appropriate response to the behaviour. Refer to Antecedent (A), behaviour (B), and consequence (C) data in [Functional behaviour assessment](https://www2.education.vic.gov.au/pal/behaviour-students/guidance/7-functional-behaviour-assessment) for more information.

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|  | Antecedent (A)  What occurred before the behaviour? | Behaviour (B)  What did the student do? | Consequence (C)  How did you or others respond? What did the student do then? |
| Are there conditions, events or factors connected with when the behaviour happens?  Consider where and when the spitting happens? Does it happen in a specific place, at a specific time, linked to a specific activity or person? | What happens immediately before the student spits?  Are there circumstances or contexts that reliably predict the spitting behaviour?  What is the trigger for the behaviour?  Consider if there any setting events that might relate to when the behaviour happens?  Consider if there has been a recent change in the classroom set up, staff or students in class, access to an activity or object? | Describe the behaviour objectively, with facts.  Do not include personal feelings, interpretations, or assumptions about what the student was thinking or feeling. | How do staff typically respond to the spitting?  How do peers typically respond to the spitting?  Is the behaviour being reinforced (encouraged) because staff engage with it or respond to it somehow?  Is the behaviour being reinforced (encouraged) because of peer responses? |
| Example:  Bathroom | Example Antecedent:  Student asked to use bathroom by staff | Example behaviour description:  Student spits at staff | Example consequence  Staff respond in an animated manner and withdraw the request. The student returns to the classroom |

*Interpretation:* The student spits at the teacher when given a non-preferred direction to go to the bathroom. *Hypothesised function:* Escape (the student is permitted to return to the classroom, thereby escaping the teacher’s request). *Possible immediate proactive strategy:* (1) Consider the necessity of prompting to use the bathroom. What is this student’s actual bathroom support needs and their patterns? Develop bathroom support needs in the student’s IEP. (2) Prompt the student about using the bathroom using appropriate communication for the student. Teach the student communication to decline the request to use the bathroom. If they decline, staff withdraw request. *Rationale for strategy:* Avoids teacher’s exposure to saliva by removing antecedent to student’s behaviour, teaches an alternative behaviour for the student to use; maximises student and staff cooperation; formally documents support needs.

## RESPONDING TO SPITTING

Responding to spitting will include prevention and intervention strategies, after it has been established that there are no medical conditions or skill deficits, affecting the student’s willingness or ability, to use the bathroom. These strategies focus on making changes to prevent spitting from happening and must target the purpose or function of the spitting. Using the spitting behaviour from the example provided, these strategies might include:

* If the function of the behaviour is suspected to be attention, encouraging appropriate behaviour by minimising unnecessary social attention following the spitting. For instance, where feasible, staff ignore the spitting and clean up any fluid out of sight of the student, reducing the social attention identified as a positive reinforcer for this behaviour. When the student requests attention without spitting or other type of challenging behaviour, the teacher provides explicit acknowledgement of the student using expected behaviour and reinforces this appropriately.
* Changing the student’s activities to include a [story-based intervention](https://starautismsupport.com/classroom-tools?rcpid=933) with self-modelling. This activity concentrates the student’s attention on appropriate replacement behaviours. The activity might include showing the visual reactions to the student’s spitting to demonstrate its impact on others, and previously identified reinforcers such as verbal praise and fun staff interactions are provided when the student participates in the intervention activity.
* Disrupting the student’s behaviour pattern in advance of a behavioural incident. This requires careful monitoring of the student and understanding their patterns of behaviour prior to the spitting, and then providing competing behaviours or distractions for the student to engage in, as an alternative to the spitting.
* Teaching the student replacement behaviours for spitting. That is, teaching the student how to escape an activity or gain attention in more acceptable ways such as saying no, or raising an arm to summon staff. The alternative behaviour must provide an equivalent outcome as the spitting, in this example, using the replacement behaviour allows the student to avoid the bathroom and continue to engage with staff and/or peers.

## RISK PREVENTION IN SCHOOLS

The [Health, Safety and Wellbeing Policy](https://www2.education.vic.gov.au/pal/health-safety-wellbeing/policy) recognises that every employee has the right to workplace health and safety, and that employee health, safety and wellbeing is essential for achieving excellent educational and work performance outcomes.

When a student spits, the immediate focus should be on making sure that everyone is safe and supporting the student through the behavioural episode whilst making sure that nothing is done to accidently reinforce their behaviour.

Schools must control, as much as possible, [the risks to employees from student challenging behaviour](https://www.worksafe.vic.gov.au/resources/guide-challenging-behaviour-risk-prevention-specialist-schools).

**PRACTICAL TIPS FOR WORKING WITH STUDENTS WHO REGULARLY spit**

* Allocate back-up staff who could make themselves available to temporarily support the student while another staff member attends to making themselves and the area safe.
* Document and communicate handover procedures to all staff working with the student. Include a checklist of steps to follow before and after working with the student.
* Collect [ABC data](https://www2.education.vic.gov.au/pal/behaviour-students/resources) by one or more staff members who frequently work or interact with the student. Data informed decisions are necessary to develop effective strategies.
* Ensure the BSP is being used accurately by regularly observing if staff are implementing the plan as it is written and providing feedback and coaching as necessary.
* Ensure resources needed to support the student, and keep staff safe, are readily available when needed. This might include easy access to first aid supplies.
* Offer support to staff impacted by the student’s behaviour. Refer to [Employee Health, Safety and Wellbeing Services](https://www.education.vic.gov.au/hrweb/safetyhw/Pages/employeeservices.aspx?utm_source=email+marketing+Mailigen&utm_campaign=Direct+Send+%E2%80%93+Emergency&utm_medium=emailhttps://www.education.vic.gov.au/hrweb/safetyhw/Pages/employeeservices.aspx?utm_source=email+marketing+Mailigen&utm_campaign=Direct+Send+%E2%80%93+Emergency&utm_medium=email) for more information.
* Consider whether staff require additional training in data collection and interpretation, devising an intervention etc.
* Ensure there is a review process for incidents that considers the data, and whether the identified function of the behaviour continues to be accurate, the prevention and intervention strategies continue to be effective, and strategies are being used by staff in line with the BSP.

**what to do if you have contact with saliva**

Staff should take the following steps immediately:

* Handover the student to another staff member for support
* Refer to [First Aid and Infection Control](https://www2.education.vic.gov.au/pal/first-aid-students-and-staff/policy)
* Refer to the [Work-Related Violence in Schools post incident checklist (PDF)](https://edugate.eduweb.vic.gov.au/edrms/website/PAL/work-related-violence-post-incident-checklist.pdf)