

Understanding & Reducing Self-Biting in Autistic Children: A Compassionate Approach

“He bites himself every time we give him a task.”

That’s how one of my toughest, most sensitive students—a 13-year-old autistic boy—first came to me. The behaviour was severe. He would bite his wrist or arm when overwhelmed, especially when faced with tasks that challenged him. As an educator, I knew I couldn’t just “correct” the behaviours. I had to understand it.

Self-injurious behaviour (SIB), especially self-biting, is one of the most complex and concerning behaviours in autism. But every behaviour is communication. And this was his way of saying, “I’m overwhelmed. I can’t cope right now.”



1. Prevention: Set Them Up for Success

Before a behaviour starts, our job is to prevent it. I began by changing the way we gave tasks:

- ♦ **Modified tasks** into very small, manageable steps
- ♦ Used **visuals** and **first-then boards** to create predictability
- ♦ Gave **choices** (“Do you want to write or colour first?”)
- ♦ Started with **errorless learning** to build success without pressure

Most importantly, I looked for triggers. Was the task too hard? Was it unexpected? Was the room noisy? Often, his biting was just a cry for **regulation** and **control**.

no biting



2. Sensory Regulation: Fill the Cup First

Autistic children often bite themselves for **sensory feedback**. Before any tasks, we did:

- ♦ **Heavy work activities** (pushing, pulling, jumping)
- ♦ Deep pressure (tight hugs, weighted lap pad)
- ♦ Provided **chewelry** (safe alternatives to bite)

These activities grounded his body and helped him feel safe in it.



3. Teach a Safer Way to Say “I’m Struggling”

Instead of waiting for the biting, we taught him **replacement behaviours**:

- ♦ A visual “I need help” card
- ♦ A “**Break, please**” signal
- ♦ Calming tools like fidgets, chew toys, or squeeze balls

And we **reinforced** every small success:

“You asked for a break—great job using your words instead of biting!”

4. When Biting Happens: Respond Calmly, Not Emotionally

We didn’t punish. We didn’t show fear. We stayed:

- Calm
- Neutral
- Supportive

We gently **blocked the behaviour** if needed and **redirected** him to a replacement strategy.

If the task was the trigger, we adjusted it, but we didn’t remove all demands. That would teach: “*If I bite, I escape.*” Instead, we taught: “*There’s a better way to ask for help.*”

5. After the Bite: Reflect, Not React

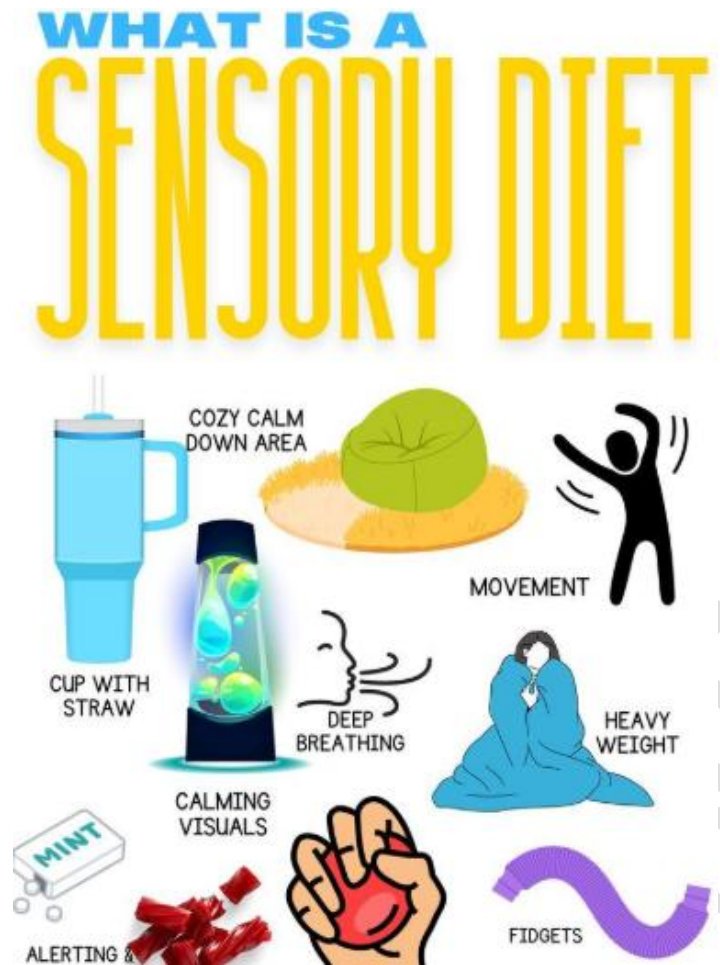
Once he calmed down, we used:

- ♦ **Social stories**
- ♦ Visuals to explain: “Next time, use your help card.”
- ♦ Gentle reinforcement when he handled frustration differently

Tools That Helped Us

- ✓ Visual schedule
- ✓ First-Then cards
- ✓ Break & Help request cards
- ✓ Chewelry / chew-safe tools
- ✓ Weighted lap pad and sensory breaks
- ✓ Task strips and visual countdowns

Make sure to create a sensory diet that can be followed at home.



Created by Nithya Jose