

THUMB SUCKING, FINGER SUCKING AND PACIFIER USE

A GUIDE FOR PARENTS AND CAREGIVERS

As a parent, your child's thumb sucking, finger sucking, or pacifier use may concern you. Your questions may be whether it is harmful, at what age your child should stop, and what could happen if your child does not stop. The following information can help answer your questions.

WHY DO CHILDREN SUCK ON THINGS?

Sucking is one of a baby's natural reflexes. In fact, babies begin to suck on their fingers or thumbs even before they are born. As newborns get older, sucking serves many purposes.

- Infants and children may suck on thumbs, fingers, pacifiers or other objects. Sucking makes them feel secure and happy, and helps them learn about the world around them.
- Young children may also suck to soothe themselves. Placing a finger or thumb in their mouth provides a sense of security at times when they might feel insecure, such as when they are separated from their parents. Since thumb sucking is relaxing, it may also help them fall asleep. For this reason, young children often suck in the evenings or at other times when they are tired.

WHAT PROBLEMS ARE CAUSED BY THUMB SUCKING OR FINGER SUCKING?

Problems from prolonged thumb and finger sucking may result when the permanent front teeth beginning to erupt as early as age five. Continued sucking may cause problems with the proper growth of the mouth and alignment of the teeth. The child could develop what is called an open bite, as pictured here. It can also cause changes in the roof of the mouth and the way the back teeth fit together.

The intensity and duration of the sucking is a factor that may determine whether or not dental problems may result. Children who rest their thumbs passively in their mouths are less likely to have difficulty than those who vigorously suck their thumbs. Aggressive thumb sucking may cause problems with a child's baby (primary) teeth. If you notice changes in the teeth, consult your child's dentist.



IS PACIFIER USE AN ALTERNATIVE?

Pacifiers can affect the teeth essentially the same way as sucking fingers and thumbs. Pacifier use is often an easier habit to break, however. If you offer your baby a pacifier, use a clean one (never dip a pacifier in sugar or honey before giving it to a baby). "Orthodontic" type pacifiers which are flat on the bottom and rounded toward the top have been shown to cause less open bite and dental problems than a pacifier that is completely round.

WHEN AND HOW SHOULD I HELP MY CHILD STOP THUMB SUCKING?

Most children stop on their own between the ages of two and four years. Sucking gradually lessens during this period, as children spend more of their waking hours exploring their surroundings. Peer pressure also causes many school-aged children to stop.

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If a child does not stop on his or her own, the habit should be discouraged after age four. Excessive pressure can do more harm than good. Here are a few tips to consider:

- Instead of scolding your child for sucking, offer praise for not sucking.
- Remember that children often suck their thumbs when feeling insecure or seeking comfort. Focus on correcting the cause of anxiety and comfort your child.
- Reward your child when he or she avoids sucking during difficult periods, such as being separated from you.
- Your dentist can encourage children to stop sucking and explain what could happen to their teeth if they do not stop.
- If these approaches do not work, remind your child of the habit by bandaging the thumb or putting a sock over the hand at night. You could even loosely wrap an ACE bandage around the child's elbow so that sucking their thumb is not as easy or comfortable.
- If the sucking persists, ask your dentist, hygienist, or pediatrician. The use of a mouth appliance or nontoxic bitter-tasting substance to coat the thumb or thumbnail may be recommended to prevent sucking.

*Some information obtained from the American Dental Association.

