

Thumb sucking and pacifier use

Like many parents, you may be concerned about your child's thumb sucking, finger sucking or pacifier use. You may wonder if it is harmful, at what age it should stop or what could happen if your child does not stop.

You can rest assured that sucking is one of an infant's natural reflexes. They begin to suck on their thumbs or other fingers while they are in the womb. Infants and young children may suck on thumbs, other fingers, pacifiers or other objects. It makes them feel secure and happy, and it helps them learn about their world.

Placing a thumb or another finger in the mouth provides some children with a sense of security during difficult periods, such as when they are separated from their parents, surrounded by strangers or in an unfamiliar environment. Since thumb sucking is relaxing, it also may help induce sleep. For this reason, young children may suck their thumbs in the evening or at other times when they are tired.

Prolonged thumb sucking may cause problems with the proper growth of the mouth and the alignment of teeth. It also can cause changes in the roof of the mouth.

Children who rest their thumbs passively in their mouths are less likely to experience difficulty than those who vigorously suck their thumbs. When an active thumb sucker removes his or her thumb from the mouth, a popping sound often is heard. Some aggressive thumb suckers may cause problems with their primary (baby) teeth.

BREAKING THE HABIT

Pacifiers can affect the teeth in essentially the same way as does sucking on fingers and thumbs. However, pacifier use often is an easier habit to break. If you offer an infant a pacifier, use a clean one. Never dip a pacifier in sugar, honey or other sweeteners before giving it to an infant.

Most children stop sucking their thumbs or other fingers on their own between the ages of 2 and 4 years. The behavior lessens gradually



Figure. Results of prolonged thumb sucking.

during this period, as children spend more of their waking hours exploring their surroundings. Peer pressure also causes many school-aged children to stop placing their fingers in their mouths.

If a child does not stop on his or her own, parents should discourage the habit after age 4 years. However, excessive pressure to stop can do more harm than good.

THINGS TO CONSIDER

- Instead of scolding the child for thumb sucking, offer praise for not doing so.
- Children often suck their fingers when feeling insecure. Focus on correcting the cause of the anxiety and comfort the child.
- Reward the child when he or she avoids thumb sucking during a difficult period, such as being separated from family members.

The dentist also can encourage the child to stop sucking his or her thumb and explain what could happen to the teeth if it continues.

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. If the thumb sucking persists, talk to your child's dentist or pediatrician. He or she can prescribe a mouth appliance or a medication with which to coat the thumb to prevent the thumb sucking. ■

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