



THUMB
SUCKING

..... AND

PACIFIERS

WHAT EVERY
— PARENT —
SHOULD KNOW





Many parents are concerned about their child's habit of sucking their thumb or fingers, or attachment to a pacifier, but the natural sucking instinct is one of an infant's first natural reflexes and ways of interacting with the world. In fact, babies often suck their thumbs or fingers even while still in the womb, because the physical act of sucking on something helps them to feel comforted and secure. Infants and toddlers often rely on thumb sucking or use of a pacifier to induce sleep and relaxation, or as a coping mechanism during stressful circumstances, such as temporary separation from the parents, or coping with a strange, new environment.



CAN THUMB SUCKING BE HARMFUL?

Many parents wonder if the habit of thumb sucking is harmful, particularly in toddlers or older children, and this concern is justified because prolonged, vigorous thumb sucking may indeed affect proper development of the mouth and jaw, the roof of the mouth, and the alignment of teeth. In some cases, children may let their thumb rest passively in their mouths, rather than sucking vigorously on it. This is less likely to cause problems than cases in which children suck their thumbs actively and aggressively for prolonged periods, particularly when done in response to anxiety or stress. Sometimes pulling the thumb from the mouth can cause a popping sound, an indication of the pressure that builds up in the mouth during active sucking. Sucking the thumb or fingers aggressively may result in problems with the development and alignment of the child's primary or baby teeth.

If your child's aggressive thumb-sucking habit extends beyond 2 to 4 years of age, it may adversely affect the development of his or her mouth and the occlusion, or alignment, of his or her teeth. If your child is able to break the habit before their permanent front teeth come in, there's less possibility of damage to permanent teeth. In more severe cases, the prolonged habit of thumb sucking may cause malocclusions in the upper permanent teeth, requiring orthodontic treatment to correct the alignment of the bite.



DO PACIFIERS PROVIDE A SAFER ALTERNATIVE TO THUMB SUCKING?



While thumb sucking is not harmful per se, particularly in very young infants, the American Academy of Pediatric Dentistry (AAPD) recommends the use of pacifiers over thumb sucking, primarily because it is much easier for parents to help a child break the pacifier habit than to break the habit of sucking their thumb or fingers. If your young infant naturally tends to suck his or her thumb, consider offering a pacifier as an alternative.



The American Academy of Family Physicians (AAFP) has determined that the use of pacifiers is actually beneficial for babies between one and six months of age, reducing the risk of sudden infant death syndrome during this period. The best time to introduce a pacifier to a baby is after the age of one month in order to prevent any confusion or interference with breastfeeding. There is also a slightly elevated risk of ear infections in babies who use pacifiers past the age of six months, according to the AAFP. Typically, adverse effects on the mouth and teeth may begin to occur as early as the age of two, but the greatest impact occurs in children who continue to use a pacifier beyond the age of four years.


To use pacifiers safely, the University of Rochester Medical Center recommends the use of one-piece pacifiers without gadgets or moving parts, and with no gel or liquid in them. Pacifiers must be cleaned and sterilized regularly and should not be attached to babies' clothes nor hung on a string or ribbon around the baby's neck. Never dip a pacifier in any food or drink, such as juice, yogurt, soft drinks, baby food, or any type of sweet liquids, which can cause the development of harmful bacteria in the mouth, and lead to tooth decay.

AT WHAT AGE SHOULD CHILDREN BREAK THE HABIT OF THUMB SUCKING OR PACIFIER USE?

To avoid the risk of developing “pacifier teeth” it is recommended that babies be weaned from pacifier use and/or thumb sucking by age two; however, some children may find it difficult to wean until as late as age four. While the habit should be discouraged in toddlers, be careful not to exert too much pressure nor to scold or shame the child for his or her habit, as this could have the reverse effect of creating a greater need for soothing and comfort, actually causing the child to increase their dependence on the behavior.

Generally, parents would be wise to provide alternative forms of soothing for their child, such as a teddy bear to sleep with, a night-light, a soothing musical or nature sounds recording, or a “security blanket.” Using a pacifier over the long-term impacts the shape and development of the mouth and the alignment of teeth, because babies’ jawbones will grow to accommodate anything held inside the mouth on a regular basis.

According to the AAPD, the use of a pacifier past the age of four may have severe negative impact on mouth and dental development, much like the habit of long-term thumb sucking does. The child’s upper front teeth may begin to separate and tip forward, teeth may shift from their proper positions, and problems may develop in the bite. Malocclusions may develop, affecting the teeth and jaw. The American Dental Association (ADA) warns of other symptoms of “pacifier teeth” such as front teeth that don’t meet when the mouth is closed, and alterations to the shape and roof of the mouth.

A young girl with curly hair, wearing a yellow dress, is smiling and looking towards the camera. She is wearing a colorful beaded bracelet on her right wrist.

Fortunately, many of these conditions may be corrected later in childhood through the use of orthodontic treatment such as braces, aligners, or other orthodontic devices.

HELPING YOUR CHILD BREAK THE HABIT

Many children may eventually abandon the habit of thumb sucking or pacifier use on their own, and parents should encourage this when they see it happening. Provide praise, rewards, affection, and encouragement whenever your child falls asleep or gets through an anxious situation without sucking on their thumb or pacifier. Never use scolding, punishment or disciplinary measures to pressure your child to stop using a pacifier or sucking his or her thumb or fingers. The stress of attempting to meet your demands may actually cause the child to increase the undesirable behavior as a coping mechanism.

If your child is particularly anxious and over-engaging in thumb sucking or pacifier use, try to address the reason for the child's anxiety and provide comfort and reassurance. Some other tips that some parents find useful include wrapping the thumb in a bandage or covering the hand with a sock at night. Other parents have seen an improvement after applying a bitter-tasting substance such as aloe vera gel to the fingers or thumb to discourage sucking the thumb or fingers at bedtime.

Your orthodontist can help!

If thumb sucking persists past the age of 5, and you begin to see the impact it is having on your child's teeth, be sure you are taking your child to the orthodontist for an evaluation. The orthodontist can also explain the possible adverse effects of thumb sucking to the child and may also prescribe a mouth appliance or a medication that you can apply to the thumb, fingers, or pacifier to discourage the sucking habit.

A healthy adult mouth begins with good oral hygiene habits starting in early childhood. With the proper care and monitoring from parents and orthodontic professionals, your child can transition through the thumb sucking and pacifier phase without any problems.

