

Thumbsucking and Pacifiers

Why do Children Suck on Things?

Sucking is a natural reflex that serves many purposes in infants and young children. Sucking on thumbs, fingers, pacifiers, or other objects can provide a sense of security or happiness. It is also a way for young infants to learn about new objects and explore the world. Since thumbsucking is relaxing and can induce sleep, young children often suck their thumbs in the evenings or when they are tired.

Can Problems Result from Prolonged Thumbsucking?

Yes. Sucking habits that persist beyond the eruption of the permanent teeth can cause problems with the proper growth of the mouth and tooth alignment. Sucking can cause the upper arch of teeth to narrow and an overbite or openbite to develop. The intensity of the sucking determines whether or not dental problems may result. Children who simply rest their thumbs passively in their mouths are less likely to have a problem with their bite compared to those who vigorously suck on their thumb, fingers, or a pacifier. In very aggressive suckers, even the baby teeth can be affected. Consult your dentist if you notice changes in your child's baby teeth.



When Should Sucking Habits be Stopped?

It is important that children stop sucking their thumbs by the time their permanent teeth begin to erupt, usually around age 6. Most children stop sucking their thumbs on their own between ages two and four. Sucking gradually lessens as children spend less time as observers and more of their waking hours exploring their surroundings. Peer pressure also causes many school-aged children to stop, as some studies have shown that classmates view thumbsucking negatively.

Is Sucking a Pacifier Less Harmful?

While pacifiers can negatively affect the teeth in essentially the same way as sucking fingers or thumbs can, the use of a pacifier is more often an easier habit to break since pacifiers can be taken away. Further, unlike thumbsucking, pacifiers have been associated with a decreased risk of Sudden Infant Death Syndrome in infants. In order to avoid the development of problems with your child's bite, try to gently wean your child from the pacifier around age one.

How can I Help my Child Break the Habit?

Remember that excessive pressure can cause more harm than good. Here are a few helpful tips:

- Instead of scolding a child for sucking, praise him/her when they are not.
- Remember that children often suck their thumbs when they are feeling insecure. Focus on correcting the cause of anxiety rather than on the thumbsucking.
- A child who is sucking for comfort will feel less of a need to suck when their parents provide more comfort.
- Reward children when they refrain from sucking during difficult periods.
- If these approaches don't work, you can remind your child of their habit by bandaging their thumb or putting a sock over their hand at night. Your dentist may recommend a mouth appliance to help break the sucking habit.
- Your dentist can encourage your child to stop sucking and explain what can happen if they continue. Speak with Dr. Rebecca for more tips or suggestions on getting through the habit.
- Older children can be involved in choosing the method of stopping their sucking habit.
- Remember, it often takes several months to successfully break a thumbsucking habit!