

Do dummies affect speech?

The use of dummies, also called pacifiers or comforters, is a common practice in many countries.



Advantages

For parents and carers, the most important advantage of the use of dummies is their role in helping babies settle down to sleep or to soothe them. Some studies show that dummies can help establish good sucking patterns in very young babies, especially those born prematurely.

Several research projects have begun looking at a correlation between dummy sucking and Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS), and whether using a dummy lowers the risk of SIDS. This area of investigation is very new and SIDS support organisations do not recommend the use of dummies as a preventative measure.

Disadvantages

There are a few disadvantages associated with the use of dummies. Some of these impact upon the child's speech and language development. The World Health Organisation say that dummy use may encourage the child and mother to stop breast feeding earlier than is in the best interests of the child. Other concerns raised by various professional groups include the increased risk of:

- Stomach and mouth infections;
- Middle ear infections (otitis media). This is because sucking opens the eustachian tube, which links the nose and middle ear. This can allow bacteria into the middle ear from the nasal area;
- Dental problems such as open bite and cross bite;
- Overdevelopment of the muscles at the front of the mouth compared to those at the back of the mouth. This may lead to a persistent tongue thrust and affect placement of the teeth;
- Reduced babbling and experimentation with sounds. When a baby or young child has a dummy in their mouth they are less likely to copy sounds adults make or to attempt to babble and play with sounds themselves. This is important in the development of speech skills.

Advice for Parents & Carers

There is a lot of confusing advice available about the use of dummies and it is important to be aware of the range of arguments.

Dummies can be useful in settling young babies and encouraging strong sucking patterns, but their specific usefulness declines after a developmental age of about six months.