



Thumbsucking

Many parents express concern over their child's thumbsucking or use of a pacifier. Often worried about affects on teeth, parents sometimes try to prevent their children from sucking their thumb or using a pacifier.

The truth is that thumbsucking and using a pacifier are quite normal and most kids forego the habits long before any damage can be done to the jaw and teeth. In fact, it has been shown that embryos actually suck on their thumbs while in the mother's womb. Thumbsucking and pacifier use both help children become comfortable with their environment, as well as offer children a sense of security. Parents should not be upset over their child's need to suck their thumb or use a pacifier.

There are some things that parents should be aware of when allowing their children to use a pacifier. To reduce choking danger, always purchase pacifiers that come as a solid molded piece instead of those which have been created as separate pieces fused together. Constantly check the pacifier, especially the nipple end, to make sure that it has not become brittle. Brittle nipples can break and choke your child. Also, never tie a pacifier around your child's neck as this can create a strangulation danger.

Most children should grow out of thumbsucking and pacifier use by age 3 or 4. As long as the habit is discontinued before their permanent teeth come in (around ages 4-5) your child will be fine. If, however, they continue this habit as their permanent teeth come in it is best to help your child discontinue their habit. The most effective way to accomplish this is to simply explain to your child that they must do so in order for their teeth to come in straight. You would be surprised at how effective simply explaining this to your child can be. When they do suck their thumb or use a pacifier give them a gentle verbal reminder.

Under no circumstances should you give negative reinforcement or punish a child for this behavior as this often causes the child to further embrace the habit. Many professionals urge parents to tape their children's fingers or apply bitter tasting solutions to the fingers to prevent thumbsucking. We would advise against this. It is somewhat cruel and is not as effective as providing positive reinforcement when children don't suck their thumb.

What should you do if your child is having trouble giving up the pacifier or thumbsucking ? We suggest gradually weaning your child. First start by not allowing them to suck their thumb or use a pacifier during certain hours of the day.

Offer them rewards when they successfully do this. Also, since thumbsucking and pacifier use are often security mechanisms, consider giving them a teddy bear, a blanket, or lots of hugs to, in effect, replace the pacifier or thumbsucking. Gradually increase the number of hours in which they are not allowed to use the pacifier or suck their thumb until they no longer need these habits. Remember, the time they need the pacifier the most (during bed) should be the last time period phased out.

Using a pacifier or sucking a thumb are quite normal for small children and should not concern parents until the child's permanent teeth start to come in. By this time most children have given up the habit. If yours has not, remember, explaining to your child why they need to stop, along with gradually weaning them from the pacifier or thumbsucking, are the most effective ways to get them to stop.