



Thumbsucking & Pacifiers

How to deal with this common habit

You & Your Child

Sucking on a thumb, finger, or a pacifier is something many infants do. Almost all infants try to suck on something other than the breast or the nipple of a bottle. About one out of every two become thumb or pacifier addicts.

Most children who suck thumbs or pacifiers begin by the age of 3 months, and nearly all start before they are 5 months old.

As long as the pacifier is safe, the risk that a sucking habit will harm your child is small. Most children give up the thumb or pacifier before they get their permanent teeth, so serious dental problems are unlikely. But it is best that children quit the habit by age 4 years, when permanent teeth begin to arrive.

Most children will stop sucking their thumb or pacifier on their own, or with a little encouragement from their parents.

On Back

How to handle thumbsucking and the use of pacifiers.



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How to deal with this common habit

Don't make a big deal out of thumb or pacifier sucking

With infants or very young children, try to ignore the habit. Many children outgrow thumb and pacifier sucking and stop on their own.

If you do take steps to break your child of the habit, be patient. You don't want a power struggle over a thumbsucking or pacifier habit.

Check your child's pacifier regularly

Pacifiers wear out. When they do, they are dangerous to children. The nipple on pacifiers can crack and break off, creating a risk of choking.

Always check your child's pacifier for signs of cracking. Pull on the nipple and examine it closely. Never use a pacifier with a cracked nipple.

Learn about your child's habit

Try to notice when your child sucks his or her thumb or uses the pacifier the most often. Is it in the morning? At night? When your child is thinking? When he or she is bored? When scared or nervous? This will help you take the right steps to help your child stop.

Don't threaten

Threats, nagging, and criticism will not help break your child of a thumbsucking or pacifier habit and may worsen the problem.

Give your child something else to do

Distract your child from thumbsucking with activities that require your child to use his or her hands, such as playing with blocks or putting a puzzle together.

The more daytime sucking you stop, the easier it will be to break your child of the habit entirely.

Try rewards

Set up a reward system to encourage your child to break the habit.

For example, write rewards on slips of paper and place them in a grab bag that your child can reach into on days he or she goes without sucking the thumb or pacifier.

Simple rewards will do, such as stickers, a snack, or even a hug from you.

Talk to your child

Try to get your child to agree that he or should stop thumbsucking or give up the pacifier.

With older children, explain why it is important to give up thumbsucking or the pacifier. Talk about the advantages of breaking the habit. You might say, "You will look more grown up." Or, "You will have your hands free to do something else."

Expect setbacks

Thumbsucking or using a pacifier are comforting habits that are difficult to break, especially when your child needs comforting the most, such as when he or she is scared or worried about something.

It may take several tries to break the habit.

Children should never be made to feel as if they have failed if they go back to thumbsucking or the pacifier. They may not want to try to quit again because that would be setting them up for failure.

Be supportive

Even if your child has difficulties breaking the habit, be supportive.

Children find it easier to give up thumbsucking when they know their parents are behind them no matter what.

