

Thumbsucking: Rules of Thumb for Parents

Like many parents you may be concerned about your child's thumbsucking. You may wonder if it's harmful, at what age your child should stop or what could happen if your child doesn't. The information below can help put your concerns in perspective and answer some of your questions.

Why Do Children Suck On Things?

Sucking is one of a baby's natural reflexes. As infants get older, sucking serves many purposes. Infants and young children may suck on thumbs, fingers, pacifiers or other objects because it makes them feel secure and happy and helps them learn about their world.

Young children may also suck to soothe themselves. Placing a finger or thumb into their mouth provides a sense of security at difficult periods such as after a scolding or when being separated from their parents. Since thumbsucking is relaxing, it may induce sleep. For this reason, young children often suck in the evenings or when they are tired.

Can Problems Result from Prolonged Thumbsucking?

Yes. After the permanent teeth come in, sucking may cause problems with the proper growth of the mouth and alignment of the teeth. It can cause changes in the roof of the mouth and constriction of the upper jaw.

The intensity of the sucking is a factor which determines whether or not dental problems may result. Children who rest their thumbs passively in their mouths are less likely to have difficulty than those who vigorously suck their thumbs. When the thumb is removed from active thumbsuckers, a "popping" sound is often heard.

Some aggressive thumbsuckers may cause problems with their primary (baby) teeth. If you notice changes in your child's primary teeth, consult your dentist or our office.

When Should Thumbsucking Stop?

Children should have ceased sucking by the time the permanent front teeth are ready to erupt. Usually, children stop between the ages of two and four years. Sucking often gradually lessens during this period as children spend more of their waking hours exploring their surroundings. Peer pressure causes many school-aged children to stop. Some studies show that thumbsucking is viewed negatively by classmates. Children

with these behaviors may have more problems making friends.

Is Sucking a Pacifier Less Harmful?

Pacifiers can affect the teeth essentially the same way as sucking fingers and thumbs. It is often an easier habit to break, however.

How Can I Help My Children Break the Habit?

Remember, excessive pressure can cause more harm than good. If your child is older, involve him or her in choosing the method of stopping.

Keep these tips in mind when helping your children:

- Instead of scolding children for sucking, praise them when they are not.
- Remember that children often suck their thumbs when feeling insecure. Focus on correcting the cause of anxiety, instead of the thumbsucking.
- Children who are sucking for comfort will feel less of a need when their parents provide comfort.
- Reward children when they refrain from sucking during difficult periods, such as when being separated from their parents.
- Your dentist can encourage children to stop sucking and explain what could happen to the teeth if they continue.
- If these approaches do not work, remind the children of their habit by bandaging the thumb or putting a sock on the hand at night. If the child pulls off the sock in their sleep, you may want to snugly tape the sock to the wrist so it does not come off easily. An ACE bandage around the elbow is another tool that has proven helpful. Your dentist or your orthodontist may recommend the use of a habit appliance that is cemented onto the teeth.

By using these tips, you can help ease your child through this phase of life. If you have any questions or concerns about your child's sucking habit, please talk with Dr. Riordan or a staff member.