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Help Your Child Break the Thumb Sucking Habit

by Becky Spivey, M.Ed.



There are numerous theories as to why children suck their thumbs, and why they won't stop. There are fewer suggestions, however, to help children break the habit.

Infants suck their thumbs even before they are born. It is a natural reflex and makes them feel secure, happy, and restful. When thumb suckers get older, the reasons for sucking remain the same. They still enjoy the comfort, pleasure, and safety of the thumb.

As children get older, thumb sucking may cause problems with the proper growth of the mouth and alignment of the teeth, especially when permanent teeth begin to come in. Thumb sucking may cause upper teeth to protrude and result in "buck" teeth. The teeth may be pushed towards the tongue. Children may develop a high roof in the mouth as well as a lisp. Thumb sucking may prevent the child from learning other ways to cope with stress. A child's social skills are also interfered with, as "non-suckers" will tease and make fun of the children that do.



Don't believe the tale that thumb sucking is the result of a maladjusted or unhappy child. Thumb sucking is a learned habit and not the result of psychological or behavioral problems in early childhood. Nor does it mean that your child is insecure or anxious. Again, it is a habit.

How can I help my child break the habit?

Most thumb suckers break the habit on their own before turning five years old. Others quit before their eighth birthday. The timing of a parent's intervention is of great importance. It is not suggested that you should force breaking the habit during toddlerhood when the child feels that he really "needs" his thumb. Here are some suggestions for breaking the habit.



- Wean your child gradually. If your child is an infant, prepare a slow-flowing nipple. Try to substitute a pacifier. Children break a pacifier habit quicker than thumb sucking.



- Do not fuss at, ridicule, or make fun of an older child for thumb sucking. Nagging or scolding will only make your child feel guilty and may encourage the habit to continue. Advise friends and relatives to ignore it.



- Offer incentives. Rewards increase the chances that the child will practice a new behavior. Find ways for your child to be motivated to stop.



- Allow the thumb sucking only at certain times and places for a specific length of time. Use a kitchen timer. Reduce the time up to 10% each day. Reward with hugs and praise.



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- Choose a “penalty” for thumb sucking outside of the specified time and place. (Remember, no nagging or fussing.) For example, insist that your child pay you a dime, nickel, or penny from his bank or take a specified amount of time away from an enjoyed activity.



- Introduce an alternate activity to replace the thumb sucking. The activity should occupy both hands (jumping rope, basketball, piano, card games, dressing a doll).



- Place a glove or soft mitten over your child’s hand, but remove before naptime or sleep. Use a bitter tasting substance on your child’s thumb nail, especially during sleep. You may purchase products to deter thumb sucking at your local pharmacy.



If the habit hasn’t obviously decreased in about a month, consult your physician or dentist. Mouth appliances are available which interfere with the comfort of the thumb sucking. They are relatively inexpensive and may produce quicker results.

***This article is intended for general information and not to be considered professional advice. Consult your physician for specific questions.*



Resources:

Sharma, Vijai P., Ph.D. “Help to Break the Thumb Sucking Habit,” Mind Publications, Internet: <http://www.mindpub.com/art015.htm>
American Dental Association, Oral Health Topics from A-Z, “Thumb sucking”<http://www.ada.org/public/>

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