

Breaking the Thumb Sucking Habit: A Guide for Parents



Highlights

Thumb sucking in infants is common.

Most children stop sucking their thumb (or fingers) by themselves.

Some children who continue thumb sucking as they get older can have problems with their teeth.

There are strategies for helping your child stop thumb sucking.

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What is thumb sucking?

Thumb sucking in infants is common, often starting before birth. In most cases, babies and toddlers stop sucking their thumb by themselves.

Thumb sucking may cause problems with children's developing teeth and jaws if it continues as they get older.

Why do babies and children suck their thumbs?

In their first year, up to 1 in 3 babies suck their thumb or fingers. Sucking is a natural reflex in newborns that helps them feed. In some babies and children, thumb sucking or sucking other fingers becomes a comforting behavior. It can help them:

- Self-soothe
- Feel secure
- Go to sleep

Most toddlers naturally stop sucking their thumb between 2 and 4 years old. By the age of 8 years, less than 1 in 20 children suck their thumb.

Is thumb sucking bad for teeth?

Many children who suck their thumb do not have problems with their teeth. Whether thumb sucking causes problems may depend on:

- Your child's growth and development
- How often they suck their thumb
- The angle of their thumb in their mouth
- How hard they suck

Thumb sucking may become a problem if your child still sucks their thumb when their permanent teeth (adult teeth) start to appear.

Possible problems caused by thumb sucking can include:

- Your child's upper jaw being pushed out further from their face
- Upper front teeth being pushed upwards and out, commonly called an overbite
- Tipped back lower front teeth
- A gap between your child's upper and lower teeth
- Not being able to bite the front teeth together

The palate (roof of the mouth) becoming pushed up and narrow
Your child's speech and the position of their tongue in their mouth being affected

How can I stop my child sucking their thumb?

Remember, most children will stop sucking their thumb by themselves by the time they are 4 years old. Others will stop when they get to school.

Positive reinforcement is the best way to help your child stop thumb sucking. Support, encouragement, and reminders are important.

Noticing when they haven't been sucking their thumb and pointing out how "grown up" they are is a way to be positive. It also becomes easier when the child realizes that they want to stop sucking their thumb.

Self-help tips

Here are some strategies for helping your child to stop thumb sucking:

Reminders - Gently remind your child to take their thumb out of their mouth. When they do, offer hugs and praise. You may also like to create a private signal if you are with other people, to prevent your child from being embarrassed about the reminder.

Record their progress - On a calendar, with rewards or stickers when they reduce or stop the behavior.

Barriers - At night, use gloves or an adhesive bandage on their thumb as a barrier.

Thumb sucking is a habit that may take some time to stop. Try to be patient and positive while helping your child. Encourage them to want to stop themselves. Don't nag them in a negative way, as this can make your child defensive.

These strategies may also help your child to stop using a dummy.

When to get help for thumb sucking habits

If your child continues to suck their thumb around the age when starting school

\(age 4 to 7 years\), discuss it with a:

Dentist

Dental practitioner

Orthodontist

It's best to wait until this age because your child needs to be old enough to understand and accept responsibility to break the habit.

Tools and Assistance

If your child's thumb sucking continues past the age of 4, there are several resources you can turn to for help:

Support Groups for Parents: Connecting with other parents who have experienced similar challenges can provide emotional support and practical advice.

Dentist or Pediatric Dentist: If thumb sucking persists and affects dental development, consult with a dentist or pediatric dentist for advice on treatment options.

Orthodontist: An orthodontist can assess the impact on the child's teeth and suggest tools like dental appliances to help discourage the behavior.

Books or Guides for Parents: Many parenting books offer techniques for breaking habits such as thumb sucking. These can be helpful in providing further tips and strategies for handling the situation.