



**WHAT EVERY  
PARENT NEEDS  
TO KNOW ABOUT  
THUMB SUCKING  
AND PACIFIER USE**

If there is one common complaint among parents, it is that of thumb sucking or pacifier use. Problem is, thumb sucking and pacifier use among babies and toddlers is largely misunderstood by parents. Most parents fall in the camp of not knowing what is normal behavior and what's gone too far, and when it may be time for a professional evaluation. The good news is that the more you know about this issue, the more comfortable and prepared you will be to deal with it!

## Simply Misunderstood

Most parents get worried when they see their baby or toddler sucking their thumb or using a pacifier. This is because they assume the worst and don't realize that it's perfectly normal behavior. In fact, the American Academy of Pediatrics reports that nearly 100 percent of normal babies will engage in nonnutritive sucking, which is sucking on a finger, thumb, pacifier, or object such as a blanket.

Infants begin nonnutritive sucking because they find it to be a calming and soothing thing to do. It has even been cited by experts as a way to help reduce the risk of sudden infant death syndrome. Since nearly all babies are born with the need to suck, they find that when they do it helps them to feel comforted. Many babies even start sucking their thumb while they are still in the womb. Parents should not be alarmed when infants are sucking their thumb, because at this point it is rarely ever an issue of concern, and just something that comes naturally to the baby.

## Growing Beyond

When it comes to pacifier use versus thumb sucking, the experts tend to agree that ditching the habit is easier when there is a pacifier involved. When the child has been attached to the pacifier and the parent is ready to pull the plug they can simply get rid of the pacifier and preoccupy the child each time they look for it. In the same respect, we can't just get rid of the thumb or finger, so it makes it a little more challenging to break the habit when the time comes.

Some children will grow out of or stop thumb sucking and pacifier use between the ages of two and four. Yet the American Academy of Pediatric Dentistry (AAPD) reports that around 20 percent of children between 36 to 48 months are still thumb sucking or using a pacifier. They recommend that if a child hasn't started the

process of weaning from it at age three then it is time for a dental evaluation for a professional opinion. Some children are still thumb sucking when they enter school. Some believe this may be a helpful deterrent, because the peer pressure will get the child to stop. But others may feel that it gives students a reason to bully and exclude the child.

### Q. Will using a pacifier lead to breastfeeding issues known as “nipple confusion” or is that a myth?

A. Many moms have had concerns over whether or not using a pacifier will interfere with their breastfeeding success. As it turns out, the research shows that there's no adverse effect when a breastfeeding mom gives their baby a pacifier. The Archives of Pediatric Adolescent Medicine reports that there is no adverse relationship between the two. They also report that nurses and doctors should advise moms on the benefits associated with pacifier use, such as a lower risk of SIDS. However, they do recommend that a pacifier be introduced 3-4 weeks after birth, after a healthy breastfeeding routine has already been established. Also, a pacifier should never be forced upon a baby who may not want to use it.

## When to be Concerned

While thumb sucking and pacifier use is normal for babies and younger toddlers, there can still be a higher risk of having some problems associated with it. If children use a pacifier often, parents may notice that it interferes with their speaking. They may try to speak with it in their mouth, preventing them from being understood. This can be a concern when it comes to their verbal skill development and parents may want to start looking for ways to begin limiting their pacifier use to naps and bedtime. It's also important to note that when using a pacifier it should not be coated in anything, such as sweets, and it should be cleaned regularly. If the pacifier looks like it is worn or has holes or tears then it is time to replace it or do away with it altogether if the child is ready.

Beyond the verbal issues that may become a concern for parents, there can be dental issues with prolonged use of pacifiers or thumb sucking. AAPD reports that the prolonged use could lead to an open bite, because the thumb or pacifier tends to push the top teeth up toward the lip or forces them to not come in properly. If there has been frequent use for a long period of time it may affect the bite, as well as the jaw growth, which support the teeth.

## Dental Exams

The American Dental Association recommends that children see a dentist for the first time within six months of their first tooth erupting, or at 12 months of age, whichever comes first. If parents follow this guideline they will have the added benefit of getting a professional opinion when it comes to the thumb sucking and pacifier use. The dentist will be able to monitor the development and notify parents if they see the nonnutritive sucking becoming a dental issue.

For those parents who may have already missed the one-year mark to take their child to the dentist, it's never too late. Booking an appointment is especially a good idea for those children who may have visible dental issues, complain of any kind of tooth or gum discomfort, or who are still thumb sucking or using a pacifier by the age of three. The dentist can identify development issues early on, refer you to a specialist, and long-term problems can be avoided.

## Looking Ahead

Thumb sucking and pacifier use is without a doubt one of the major concerns that parents of babies and toddlers have. If you have a child in this age range that uses one of the important things to know is that you are not alone, and it's not likely to last forever. It's a natural process that babies do in order to comfort and soothe themselves, and having effective self-calming abilities is actually a great thing.

That being said, it can pose problems in some children so it can't be ignored for an extended period of time. If you have concerns about it or there is prolonged use, then it may be time to seek an evaluation from a dentist. This will help put your mind at ease and get an early handle on any dental issues that may be resulting from the prolonged use. Keeping tabs on the issue and stepping in if there are concerns may provide the happy medium that protects your child's teeth, while allowing them to self-soothe using their preferred method.

## 8 Tips for Breaking a Thumb Sucking or Pacifier Habit

Many children will leave behind the thumb sucking or pacifier habit on their own, while others need a little motivation. When you feel it's time to pull the plug there are numerous things you can try to help your child successfully leave the habit behind. If they are on board with the idea it's going to be a lot easier, but even if they are not there's a way that will work for every child!

Here are 8 tips to help break the habit:

1. Depending on your child, you may want to go cold turkey. Just pull the pacifier and throw them all out without the child seeing you do this. Each time they look for it, distract them. After about two days they will no longer be looking for it and will have moved on.
2. Offer your child a new comfort object, such as letting them pick out a new stuffed animal in exchange for no longer using a pacifier or sucking their thumb.
3. Avoid punishment to get the desired behavior, because it's something that has been allowed up until this point, and you will have more success breaking the habit by using positive reinforcement.
4. Create a reward system with your child. For each day or half day they go without using a pacifier or sucking their thumb, give them a sticker. Once they go so many days or a week, let them pick out a small prize or reward.
5. If you have a toddler, try talking to them about why it's a good idea to now break the habit. Explain how it may affect their teeth if they continue. This approach may work with some kids who are old enough to understand.
6. Help your child find a new way to self-soothe, which is usually why they are using a pacifier or thumb sucking in the first place. This may be having a special blanket, doing meditation, thinking about their favorite place, taking a warm bath, reading a book, using a rocking chair, and practicing deep breathing.
7. If your child has prolonged use and nothing seems to be working to break the habit, take them to the dentist for a professional evaluation. The dentist can give you some recommendations, including dental appliances that can be used if there are concerns.
8. Have patience when trying to help your child break the habit. After all, they are just toddlers, so it's a good idea to consistently work toward reaching the goal, and give them positive reinforcement along the way.



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