

Quitting Thumb Sucking and Pacifiers

As children grow and develop, their need to suck usually goes away, most often by the time they are 6 to 8 years old. Also, with increases in peer pressure, children are more able to control their behavior. However, parents sometimes want this behavior to stop before peer pressure becomes an issue.

If you want to break your older child's sucking habits, the first step is to ignore them! Most often, they will disappear with time. Harsh words, teasing, or punishment may upset your child, and the habit will get worse. Punishment is not an effective way to get rid of habits.

Older children (more than 3 years of age) may use sucking to relieve boredom. Try getting your child's attention with an activity that she finds fun. Rewarding good behavior is the best way to produce a change. Praise and reward your child when she does not suck her thumb or use the pacifier. Star charts, daily rewards, and gentle reminders, especially during the daytime hours, are also very helpful.

If these measures do not work and your child wants to stop, your pediatrician might recommend trying a reminder such as covering the thumb with a plastic strip or "thumb guard" (an adjustable plastic cap that is taped to the thumb). Your child should be directly involved with the treatment chosen. Before using these methods, be sure to explain them to your child. If they make your child afraid or tense, stop them at once.

If your child's teeth are affected by the behavior and you have tried all the methods described above, talk to a pediatric dentist. Some dentists will install a device in the mouth that prevents the fingers or thumb from putting pressure on the palate or teeth. In fact, this device usually makes it so unpleasant to place the thumb or finger into the mouth that your child removes his thumb or finger.

Severe emotional upsets or stress-related problems might cause your child to suck his thumb or use a pacifier for a long time. It is also possible that your child may be one of the very few who cannot seem to stop. However, most children stop daytime sucking habits before they get very far in school. This is because of peer pressure. These same children might still use sucking as a way of going to sleep or calming themselves when they are upset. This is usually done in private and causes no harm either emotionally or physically. Putting too much pressure on your child to stop this type of behavior may cause more harm than good. Even these children eventually stop the habit on their own.