

Thumb, Finger and Pacifier Habits

Q: Why do children suck on fingers, pacifiers or other objects?

A: This type of sucking is completely normal for babies and young children. It provides security. For young babies, it's a way to make contact with and learn about the world. In fact, babies begin to suck on their fingers or thumbs even before they are born.

Q: Are these habits bad for the teeth and jaws?

A: Most children stop sucking on thumbs, pacifiers or other objects on their own between two and four years of age. No harm is done to their teeth or jaws. However, some children repeatedly suck on a finger, pacifier or other object over long periods of time. In these children, the upper front teeth may tip toward the lip or not come in properly.

Q: When should I worry about a sucking habit?

A: Your pediatric dentist will carefully watch the way your child's teeth come in and jaws develop, keeping the sucking habit in mind at all times. For most children the AAPD recommends encouraging these habits cease by age three.

Q: What can I do to stop my child's habit?

A: Most children stop sucking habits on their own, but some children need the help of their parents and their pediatric dentist. When your child is old enough to understand the possible results of a sucking habit, your pediatric dentist can encourage your child to stop, as well as talk about what happens to the teeth if your child doesn't stop. This advice, coupled with support from parents, helps most children quit. If this approach doesn't work, your pediatric dentist may recommend a mouth appliance that blocks sucking habits.

Q: Are pacifiers a safer habit for the teeth than thumbs or fingers?

A: Thumb, finger and pacifier sucking all affect the teeth essentially the same way. However, a pacifier habit is often easier to break.