

No Crying Necessary: Simple Ways to Stop Thumb Sucking

At first it was adorable, but now it has become worrisome. Starting to fear your child is addicted to thumb sucking? Push those worst-case scenarios and harsh weaning tactics from your mind. Here is the truth about the dental risks, when it is necessary to intervene, and effective ways to break the habit for good.



Long-Term Effects of Non-Nutritive Sucking

Prolonged sucking can ultimately lead to a number of oral issues: jaw misalignment, protrusion of the upper teeth, crookedness and/or bite problems.

Left unchecked, sucking can also alter the natural position of the jawbone and change the shape and sensitivity of the roof of the mouth, which can lead to a lisp over time.

While corrective action and regular dentist visits can save your little one from such dental trauma, timing can make a big difference in the experience for parent and child.

When Should Parent Intervene?

According to the American Dental Association, dental problems associated with thumb sucking typically occur with the arrival of permanent teeth. This means that if your child only has primary teeth, you can table extreme measures to curb the habit for now.

In fact, thumb sucking is a natural, self-soothing reflex for many babies and toddlers, and a wise (and non-traumatic) course of action may simply be to wait and see if your child outgrows the behavior over time.

If your child starts to lose baby teeth, however, and still sucks his or her thumb aggressively, you'll need to step in to prevent dental problems from emerging.

How to Put an End to the Thumb Sucking for Good

Just as there are different reasons that drive children to suck their thumbs, there are also a number of options to help stop it. Here are a few tried-and-true methods worth considering:

1. **Provide alternate means of comfort:** if the habit seems born out of anxiety or stress, see if a well-timed hug or kiss, or offering a favorite toy does the trick

2. **Reward his or her efforts:** enthusiastic praise, a sticker, or other special treat can be very motivating and make the process fun
3. **Use creative reminders:** agree on a special signal to help discretely halt the behavior if you catch your child doing it in public, and try a bandage over the finger or a sock over the hand to deter thumb sucking at night
4. **Seek help from the dentist:** a mouth guard or special coating for the thumb may ultimately be recommended depending on your child's dental situation

No matter which route you choose, keeping a positive approach and demeanor will go a long way in making the experience less stressful for both you and your child.

It could also be helpful to team up with your dentist to tackle the issue. A dental examination and professional guidance can help point you in the right direction depending on the severity of thumb sucking and your child's age. Schedule a consultation to share your concerns, and/or provide an update on the situation during your next appointment.

Sources: