



# Tooth Talk

## **“Hey Doc, my child is still sucking his/her thumb!! Should I be concerned?”**

Thumb sucking is a very common habit among children. It is a difficult habit to break. Babies have natural rooting and sucking reflexes, which can cause them to put their thumbs/fingers into their mouths, sometimes even before birth. Because thumb sucking is soothing to babies, some might eventually develop a habit of thumb sucking when they're bored, tired, or anxious. Many children who suck their thumbs or fingers do so while holding a treasured object, such as a security blanket.

Many children stop thumb sucking during toddler years, between ages 2 to 4. Thumb sucking isn't usually a concern until children's permanent teeth come in. At this point thumb sucking can lead to dental problems such as:

- a big gap (open bite) between upper and lower front teeth
- a narrow, elongated palate (roof of the mouth)
- upper front teeth sticking out
- lower front teeth crowding
- restriction on the lower jaw's forward growth
- speech impairment
- etc.

It is therefore highly recommended that a child stops the thumb sucking habit around the age of 4.

Techniques for helping your child stop thumb sucking include the followings:

- 1) Use positive reinforcement- Praise your child or provide small rewards when he/she is not thumb sucking.
- 2) Identify triggers- If your child sucks his/her thumb in response to stress, identify the real issue and provide comfort in other ways, such as a hug or reassuring words.
- 3) Offer gentle reminders- If your child is thumb sucking without thought, gently remind him/her to stop. Don't scold or criticize or ridicule your child.
- 4) Consider peer pressure- Having a sleep-over with friends who do not suck their thumbs can be very helpful. If your child sucks his/her thumb and his/her friends mention it, this might just be the motivation your child needs to stop.
- 5) Weaken the habit- When you notice your child's thumb is in the mouth, try to distract him/her. Engage your child in activities that require him/her to use both hands. Before nap or bedtime, have your child hold the book you are reading or hug a stuffed animal with each arm.
- 6) Help your child notice- Develop a secret signal between the two of you so that when your child unconsciously puts his/her thumb in the mouth, you can use the secret signal to help your child realize what he/she is doing. By using a secret signal, you replace what could be a shameful situation with fun.
- 7) Thumb sucking appliance- You can ask your dentist to fabricate a thumb sucking appliance, such as a thumb crib, and have it cemented in your child's mouth so that your child cannot put his/her thumb in the mouth.
- 8) Mitten or bitter-tasting liquid can be placed over the hand/thumb to discourage your child from thumb sucking.



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