

# Thumb-Sucking

## & Your Child's Teeth



Along with favorite blankets, teddy bears, and nap time, thumb-sucking can be one of the most comforting aspects of childhood. According to a recent report, **between 75% and 95% of infants suck their thumbs**, so chances are there's a thumb-sucker (or a former thumb-sucker) in your family. Is this cause for worry?

In most cases, no. However, it's important to **pay attention to your child's habits**, in case his behavior has the potential to affect his oral health.

### What Is Normal Thumb-Sucking Behavior?

The majority of children suck a thumb or a finger from a very young age; some even start inside the womb. **Sucking is a natural reflex for an infant**, and it serves an important purpose. Sucking often provides a sense of security and contentment for a young one. It can also be relaxing, which is why many children suck their thumbs as they fall



asleep.

According to the American Dental Association, **most children stop thumb-sucking on their own** between the ages of two and four. They simply grow out of a habit that is no longer useful to them.

However, some children continue sucking beyond the preschool years (although studies show that the older a child gets, the lower his chances of continuing to suck his thumb). **If your child is still sucking when his permanent teeth start to erupt**, it may be time to take action to break the habit.

## What Signs Should I Watch For?

First, take note of how your child sucks his thumb. If he sucks passively, with his thumb gently resting inside his mouth, he is less likely to cause damage. If, on the other hand, he is an aggressive thumb-sucker, placing pressure on his mouth or teeth, **the habit may cause problems with tooth alignment and proper mouth growth**. Extended sucking may lead to a need for orthodontic treatment in the future.

If at any time you suspect your child's thumb-sucking may be affecting his oral health, please give us a call or bring him in for a visit. We can help you assess the situation.

## How Can I Help My Child Quit Thumb-Sucking?

Should you need to help your child end his habit, follow these guidelines:

1. **Always be supportive and positive.** Instead of punishing your child for thumb-sucking, give praise when he doesn't suck.
2. **Put a band-aid on his thumb or a sock over his hand** at night. Let him know that this is not a punishment, just a way to help him remember to avoid sucking.
3. **Start a progress chart** and let him put a sticker up every day that he doesn't suck his thumb. If he makes it through a week without sucking, he gets to choose a prize (trip to the zoo, new set of blocks, etc.) Making your child an active participant in his treatment will increase his willingness to break the habit.
4. If you notice your child sucking when he's anxious, **work on alleviating his anxiety** rather than focusing on the thumb-

sucking.

5. Take note of the times your child tends to suck (long car rides, while watching movies) and **create diversions** during these occasions.
6. **Explain clearly what might happen to his teeth** if he keeps sucking his thumb.

Whatever your method, always remember that **your child needs your support and understanding** during the process of breaking the thumb-sucking habit. In case you're a parent who wasn't a thumb-sucker and you have a child who is, Shel Silverstein provides a bit of insight in a classic poem from his book *Where the Sidewalk Ends*:

### Thumbs

Oh, the thumb-sucker's thumb  
May look wrinkled and wet  
And withered, and white as the snow,  
But the taste of a thumb  
Is the sweetest taste yet  
(As only we thumb-suckers know).

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