

2.8 Thumb and finger sucking

Finger, thumb or dummy sucking are common childhood habits. Many parents are concerned that these habits will affect their children's dental development.

Sucking of the thumb or fingers is a natural reflex in babies and young children. Most children grow out of finger sucking between two and four years of age. Tired, stressed or hungry children are likely to suck their thumb or fingers. The effects of thumb sucking are usually reversible up until the age of six or seven, because children still have their deciduous teeth. If thumb and finger sucking occurs beyond the age of six or seven, dental problems may arise including:

- ❖ **Buck teeth** – excessive sucking can push the front teeth out of alignment, causing teeth to protrude. This can alter shape of the face and lead to an open bite.
- ❖ **A lisp** – a child who sucks their fingers and thumbs can push their teeth out of their normal position. This interferes with the correct formation of certain speech sounds resulting in a lisp.

A lisp may also be created by a condition called tongue thrust, which is a habit of sealing the mouth for swallowing by thrusting the top of the tongue forward against the lips. Tongue thrust exerts pressure on the front teeth, increasing the likelihood that the teeth will be pushed out of their normal position and interfere with the correct formation of certain speech sounds. If tongue thrust is suspected, a referral to a speech pathologist is recommended.

Thumb sucking versus a dummy or pacifier

Parents will often ask, 'What is worse, thumb sucking or the use of a pacifier?' Studies of thumb suckers show they have a greater problem in breaking their habit than do dummy (pacifier) suckers (Adair 2003).

Lip sucking

Sucking of the lower lip (lip sucking) may occur in isolation or it may occur with thumb sucking. When the lower lip is repeatedly held beneath the upper front teeth the result is usually an open bite.



Open bite



Effects of lip sucking



Discussion with parents and carers

Sucking on fingers or thumbs is healthy and normal for infants. Most children stop somewhere between two and four years of age. Parents should encourage children to stop sucking their thumb or fingers and lip around that age, but this can be difficult as children need to have an understanding of the habit and want to stop before it will cease. Some tips for parents and carers to assist a child to break the thumb and finger sucking habit are outlined below (these strategies can also be adapted to lip sucking).

Tips for parents and carers to assist the child to break the thumb or finger sucking habit

Reward a child:

- ✦ Use praise or a hug to reinforce their decision to stop the habit.
- ✦ Use ticks or stars on a calendar for each day or week the child does not suck their thumb or fingers. After the successful period, reward the child with a treat such as a surprise outing, a toy or a special privilege (food is not encouraged as a reward).
- ✦ The younger the child, the more frequently the reward may be required. Reward periods can gradually be stretched out. Some children do not lose the impulse to suck until they have collected as many as three or four rewards, which may take as long as three to four months.

Offer encouragement:

- ✦ Parents and other family members can offer encouragement. Family members need to be patient to assist children through their difficult time.
- ✦ Parents may choose to encourage a child to bond with their favourite toy.

Limit nagging:

- ✦ The frequent repetition by parents to take the child's thumb out of their mouth can be counterproductive. It is children, not parents, who must learn to control the habit. If children feel they are being nagged, they may become defensive.
- ✦ Occasional good humoured comments that bring the sucking activity to the child's notice can be helpful.

Reminders:

- ✦ Give the child a mitten to wear as a reminder not to suck, or apply unpleasant-tasting nail paint, (available from pharmacies) on the fingers or thumb.
- ✦ Place a band-aid over the thumb at bedtime.

Offer distractions:

- ✦ While a child is watching TV, have toys available to play with.
- ✦ Sit with a child during TV time and give them a cuddle (another form of comfort).
- ✦ For car rides, have toys and books available to keep their hands occupied.

Children can easily drift back to their old habit and it may take several attempts before the habit is completely broken. Remember that patience is the key, and that a child's first days without sucking are usually the most difficult. Like all habits, the yearning slowly diminishes and it eventually becomes easier to control. Effective methods will vary according to each child and their situation.