



First Steps

#43

Those Troublesome Thumbs

Our children do not come with instructions. Parents Reaching Out provides resources that help families make informed decisions about the care and education of their children. We thank the Parent Education Network, a project of Parents Helping Parents of Wyoming, Inc. for permitting us to share their *Thoughts for Tots* in this information series.

One of the most common habits of infants and toddlers is thumb sucking. Ultrasound pictures have shown babies sucking their thumbs or fists even before they are born! Many babies begin sucking their fingers or thumbs shortly after birth. The sucking instinct in newborns is for survival. Sucking brings food, and food brings comfort. The need to suck is very strong, especially for the first six to ten months of life. Sucking a thumb or fingers is a way for children to calm and quiet themselves. Most children stop sucking thumbs or fingers on their own somewhere around age one, but some children suck their thumbs for two or three more years.



What Should Parents Know About Thumb or Finger Sucking?

Newborn to 1 year:

- Sucking thumbs, fingers or pacifiers is very natural at this age.
- Thumb sucking happens when the baby or toddler is hungry, seeking comfort, tired, teething, scared, or sick.

One to two years:

- About 45% of children suck their thumbs or a pacifier up to age two, mainly as a way to handle anxiety and stress.
- Parents are encouraged to distract children when they suck their thumbs by giving them some other pleasurable thing to do (play, sing a song and clap hands, eat a nutritious snack, go for a walk, etc.)
- Try to allow pacifiers and thumb sucking only at naptime or bedtime.



Two to four years:

- By this age, 85% to 99% of children have stopped thumb sucking on their own.
- Children find other ways to calm and comfort themselves, and at this age can often put their needs into words, like “I’m hungry” or “I need a hug.”

After four years:

- Thumb sucking at this age may affect a child’s communication and social skills
- Thumb sucking after age four may cause dental problems (such as an overbite or too much space between the upper and lower teeth)

How Can Parents Help Their Children Stop Sucking Their Thumbs or Pacifiers?

- Children under age 2 who suck on a pacifier can be given the pacifier only at nap time or bed time. This limits the use of a pacifier to the bedroom.
- Don't make a big issue of pacifier or thumb sucking. Calling too much attention to this habit may actually make it worse.
- Until your child is old enough to reason, any pressure you apply will only lead to a struggle between the two of you.
- For children over age three, choose a time when your child seems ready to stop sucking his/her thumb. If your child isn't ready, it won't work.
- Choose a time when your child can understand why he or she should quit sucking his or her thumb—show her what thumb sucking can do to teeth, show the calluses on the thumb or fingers, say that other children his/her age don't suck their thumbs, explain how germs can be transferred from hand to mouth, etc. Explain all of this in a logical, matter-of-fact voice, not a scolding voice.



- Set small, realistic goals like no thumb sucking for a morning or an afternoon, then reward your child with a sticker, special story, or playtime with you when he/she meets that goal.
- Move forward to longer periods of time (like 3 days, or a week) with no thumb sucking with a larger reward, like a trip to the park or having a friend come to play.
- If necessary put a colorful band aid on the thumb or fingers, or use bitter tasting solution as a reminder to your child. Over-the-counter products are available in stores.
- Think of a signal or cue to remind your child when he/she starts to thumb suck. Just an “Uh-oh” or “Oops” and a gentle arm around the shoulder would be enough. Discuss this with your child so that he or she will be ready to respond to the signal.
- Praise your child for not sucking his/her thumb without making a big deal of it.
- Something like “I’m proud of you for being so grown up”.
- Don't punish or scold; be patient and loving to help your child stop this childish habit.

Children usually outgrow thumb sucking on their own between the ages of three and six. The best way to handle thumb sucking is to ignore it. However, if your child continues to suck his or her thumb past the age of four, you do need to help him/her get over the habit to avoid dental problems, speech problems, and social problems (teasing from other children or adults).

Turning your child's attention to playing or doing something else with his/her hands may reduce thumb sucking. Bitter-tasting solutions, rewards, and reminders may also help your child break the thumb sucking habit. It may even be practical to give your child a pacifier as an infant to keep him/her from starting to suck a thumb. Pacifiers can be taken away, but thumbs cannot! Avoid scolding, nagging, and punishing because doing so only makes the child insecure.

For more information call Parents Reaching Out. We offer phone consultations and provide workshops in English or Spanish to communities throughout New Mexico. This publication was developed under a grant from the New Mexico Department of Health Family Infant Toddler program. However, the views here expressed do not necessarily represent the policy of the Department of Health and should not be assumed to be an endorsement by the New Mexico Department of Health.