

Thumbsucking

Many parents worry about toddlers and pre-schoolers who suck their thumbs. Thumb-sucking is normal in infants and young children. In fact, 50% to 87% of children suck their thumbs. It is one of the most common childhood habits.



Babies have a natural urge to suck. It makes them feel happy and secure. For some children, it becomes a habit. They suck their thumbs when bored, tired, hungry or afraid. Others suck their thumbs to help them relax while going to sleep.

Most children between the ages of three and six stop sucking their thumb on their own. About 85% to 99% of kids will stop, without help from a parent.

Some research shows that parents who strongly battle with their young children about thumb-sucking actually make the habit worse. Their battles actually encourage the habit instead of helping the child to stop.

The American Dental Association tells parents that thumb-sucking does not cause lasting harm with teeth unless it continues past the ages of 4 to 5. If your child is less than 4 years of age, do not worry. If your 4 or 5 year old is still sucking her thumb, you can help.

1. Encourage her to stop, but do not pressure.

2. Praise him for not sucking his thumb.
3. Provide distractions when you see her sucking her thumb. Find an activity that makes her use both hands.
4. Use a reward system to motivate him to quit. Set goals for no thumb-sucking. Start small, maybe 2 – 3 hours without sucking his thumb. Then gradually increase the time to days and weeks. Rewards should be small or could be favorite activities.
5. Talk to your child about the need to stop. Your child's dentist or doctor may be of help.
6. Use a non-toxic, bitter tasting nail coating such as Thum or vinegar.
7. Use a combination of these methods.

In rare cases, children older than 5 years of age may suck their thumb because of an emotional disorder. A primary care doctor, psychologist or psychiatrist can provide help. Consult them for questions or concerns. Patience, help and encouragement are your best tools.

Call the Parent Help Line. We listen. We can find you help.

1-217-544-5808 or 1-888-727-5889, 10 a.m. to 10 p.m., 7 days a week or log onto www.parenthelpline.org