

Thumb Sucking and Pacifiers: Should You Be Worried or Not?

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Thumb sucking and pacifier use in children, otherwise known by the experts as “nonnutritive sucking habits” are normal in infants and young children. However, if continued too long, these activities may result in long term problems for the child’s bite.

According to the American Academy of Pediatric Dentistry guidelines, it is recommended that children stop thumb sucking or pacifier use by 36 months of age or younger. Here are some of the problems that prolonged thumb sucking can cause:

1. Open bite. Usually the front upper teeth should overlap or cover the lower front teeth a little bit. Prolonged thumb sucking allows back teeth to erupt too much, so eventually, an “open bite” occurs. The first picture shows normal overlap of the front teeth. The second picture demonstrates an “open bite” due to prolonged thumb sucking.



2. Thumb sucking can cause the upper front teeth to protrude or “stick out” excessively.
3. Prolonged thumb sucking can change the way the back teeth fit together. This can ultimately lead to a multitude of orthodontic problems in the permanent dentition.

The amount of the problem is related to the frequency, duration, direction, and intensity of the habit. For example, children who engage in nonnutritive sucking habits for 10 minutes at bedtime are much different than a child that sucks his or her thumb all day long.

Another way of thinking of it is that tooth movement, whether it is with braces or a thumb, requires an adequate amount of pressure on the tooth for an adequate time per day, and for enough days, weeks, and months. Imagine if your dentist gave you an orthodontic appliance and told you to wear it for 10 minutes per day. Your immediate reaction would be, “That’s not going to do anything!” Well, thumbs aren’t going to move teeth significantly at all either with only 10 minutes of pressure.

If you have questions about thumb sucking or pacifier use, ask your dentist. Your dentist as a matter of routine should evaluate the fit of your child’s back teeth and front teeth, and give you an estimate regarding future crowding of teeth. If any of these parameters are related to a thumb sucking habit, your dentist should provide you with guidance on strategies to help your child. These strategies may include patient/parent counseling, behavior modification techniques, and appliance therapy.

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