

Finger or Thumb Sucking

Finger or thumb sucking is surely a well-known habit to all of us. In fact, it could be argued that finger sucking is a problem for the child itself, too. Parental concern regarding this habit often takes significant dimension, especially for the mother, who considers thumb sucking a personal defeat. Both father and mother feel that it is their primary duty to break their child's "bad" habit of thumb sucking or finger sucking as they believe it can cause a myriad of problems. "It will stay as a habit until older age, why should my child behave immaturely, he is picking up and spreading germs in his mouth and organism, finger sucking will deform the finger, or even the entire hand, it will stupefy my child or damage his teeth". With the exception of the latter, which we shall refer to at a later stage, all fears related to thumb or finger sucking are unfounded. The only well-founded fear is that the child could be psychologically traumatised due to the inappropriate behaviour of the parents arising from such imaginary fears.

Instinct is powerful

From the moment of birth, babies begin to cry and make mouthing and sucking movements. Such movements are vital instincts and powerful primitive reflexes which aid survival. The intensity and duration of sucking reflexes, however, are not the same for all children. Therefore, it is crucial not to prematurely or abruptly interrupt the infant's mood for nursing or bottle feeding. Many infants around the age of 7-10 months are happy to abandon the bottle and start eating from a spoon. Others, however, even after their first year of life, insist on nursing or bottle feeding, and persistently fight against any attempt to drink their milk out of a spoon. The spoon is surely not to be blamed for since they have been eating other foods out of it for months now. Also, they drink all other fluids out of a cup. Their refusal to drink milk with the spoon expresses the strong influence of their instinct for nursing or bottle feeding, and any drastic measure taken to interrupt nursing or bottle feeding could harm the child. With a little patience, in a few months the child will stop asking for the bottle. Conversely, if we do not show the patience as the circumstances require, it is almost certain that the child will replace the bottle with the finger, and any instinct for nursing or bottle feeding will be intensified, reinforced and maintained for longer period. It is important to patiently wait until the child stops asking for the bottle on its own; this, of

course, does not mean bottle feeding the child whilst asleep, thus contributing to the perpetuation of such habit only to make the feeding procedure that a spoon requires quicker. It is natural for a child to insist on bottle feeding for many years, if we do not provide an alternative solution.

Reasons

The age at which the child begins to suck his finger determines the reason for such manifestation.

During the first few months of life, the infant's hand reaches the mouth only randomly. After the 3rd or 4th month, however, the child slowly manages to bring all his fingers in the mouth and then only his thumb. An infant sucking its fingers shows that it has not satisfied its nursing instinct. In such cases, it is crucial to allow the baby breastfeed the mother as long as it desires. If the baby drinks formula milk, the nipple hole should have an opening small enough so that the infant does not finish the meal quickly. A nipple with a smaller opening extends the time of feeding, which often leads to early termination of finger or thumb sucking.

When the infant insists on sucking its finger, it is preferable to give it a bottle, which can be used as a satisfactory alternative to finger-sucking. The bottle has the advantage that it cannot be completely dominated by the infant, as it often slips from its mouth, and being foreign, the infant is sucking it with less passion, making it therefore easier to terminate such a habit.

If thumb or finger sucking begins at around the age of 12 months, then it is more likely that the infant is not trying to satisfy its instinct but to find companionship. Children usually turn to their thumbs when they feel bored, lonely, insecure, bad, tired or guilty after a punishment and, very often, when they are ready to sleep. Thumb-sucking is an easy refuge and a habit that relieves and pleases the child. Around the age of two, when the child becomes more active, thumb-sucking becomes less frequent and is limited only to nap time and bedtime. Most children stop thumb-sucking on their own before the age of 3. There are, of course, certain times in the day when thumb sucking may occur. These are while watching television or listening to a story. It is obvious that by switching off the television or stop narrating a story contributes to the termination of the thumb-sucking habit.

Do not complicate things

A child, especially an older child, who is sucking his finger or thumb for several hours a day means that his sucking needs are not being met. It shows a clear message, that of: "I am not happy". Something that he greatly needs is missing from his life, just like a new-born who cries to notify us that it is hungry or dirty. This is why any attempt to force the child break the habit of thumb-sucking is pointless, incomprehensible and doomed to fail. It is as if we are trying to close the mouth of a baby who is crying for food, instead of feeding it.

It is important to treat the symptoms and not the cause; any attempt to forcibly suppress the activity will add further anxiety to the child, thus extending the symptom and slowing down the procedure of treating the cause. In the unlikely event that the drastic measure taken to break the habit has terrorised the child at such level that it has abandoned finger or thumb sucking will certainly result in the child seeking refuge to another habit or ways of pleasure which may be more irritating for the parents.

If the child, regardless of his age, suddenly resumes the habit of finger or thumb sucking weeks or months later, then you should seek the causes in the events of the same or the previous day. Surely something happened that caused to reverse the delicate balance achieved by the child. Identifying the problem is not difficult, and its solution would be much easier if provided immediately.

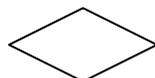
Most problems that children encounter are often limited to their relations with their parents and remain within the family. Amongst the issues discussed between relatives, friends, acquaintances or even strangers, thumb-sucking is perhaps the most annoying for parents. "It will stupefy my child, it will cause his finger to deform, why not tie hand or apply quinine to his finger to avoid sucking it, give him a slap on the hand" are the most common, yet very annoying comments. And, there are even worse. We understandably feel annoyed by these silly comments regarding our child's problem. We have to be prepared to give a neutral response that does not leave much room for discussion. For example: "we have discussed it with our paediatrician and I would rather follow his advice". It would be a major mistake to take into serious consideration all these silly comments and suggestions, which will not only make us feel offended, but may result into a possible burst of anger against the child, forgetting that thumb-sucking might be a means to express his needs. And, most importantly: Any drastic measure taken to tackle the problem will have the exact opposite effects.

I believe that the best way to sum up this issue is by providing a few practical tips:

- ✓ Don't prohibit your child if he tries to suck his thumb or fingers.
- ✓ Do not tie his hand or wear him a glove.
- ✓ Resist the temptation to use aversive techniques, such as covering your child's thumbnail with quinine or another bitter substance and other medicine to break this bad habit.
- ✓ No to punishment.
- ✓ No to mockery, obloquy and humiliation.
- ✓ No to constant reminders not to suck his thumb.
- ✓ No to threats and intimidations that the child will get sick or cause his teeth to grow crooked.
- ✓ No to bribes and coaxing.
- ✓ Never say "stop sucking your finger or else I will stop loving you"
- ✓ Never say "only babies suck their finger"
- ✓ Never say "if you loved me, you would stop sucking you finger"
- ✓ Do not forget that a child who sucks his finger is seeking for love, understanding and support.
You must respect the confessions he wants to make, but can not.

Thumb or finger sucking and teeth

Pacifier use or finger-sucking is an easier habit to break than thump-sucking. Children who suck their thumbs aggressively, intensely and routinely can push the upper teeth forward. This may even extend to the bone leading to malocclusion of the permanent teeth, i.e. the upper teeth come further forward and overlap those of the mandible (lower teeth). The problem may even become more serious if the child previously had orthodontic problems, regardless of thumb-sucking. If thumb-sucking is consistent and intense after the age of 5, it is important to have the child checked by an orthodontist.



How to curb thumb-sucking

When your child reaches the preschool age, it might be tempting to pop his thumb out of his mouth every time he starts to suck, especially if you think it might be affecting the growth and development of his teeth and jaw. But you may want to consider resisting that urge and use a different strategy.

This is a self-soothing activity. It is important to remember that you will not have a child who is going off to college sucking his thumb. It will eventually come to an end.

Adults don't realise how anxiety-provoking growing up is for children, and sucking their thumbs or fingers is a soothing activity that can help reduce their anxiety. So if your child is approaching preschool and still sucking away, here's how to handle it correctly:

1. Do try to limit the time that your child sucks his thumb to his bedroom or in the house, not in public. Explain to him that this is a bad habit during bed time and at night.
2. Don't turn it into a confrontation. Don't tell your child: "You cannot suck your thumb anymore". Try to recognise him and praise him when he's not sucking his thumb instead of criticising when he is.
3. Do talk to your child about his thumb sucking or finger sucking. Help your child understand that when he is ready to stop, you will be there to help. He will eventually come to you and tell you: "Mommy, I don't want to suck my thumb anymore", because you've empowered him to get there.
4. Don't prohibit your child if he tries to suck his thumb or fingers after being hurt or injured. He needs to be in his comfort zone, and by not letting him go there, you're only traumatising him more.
5. Do practice self-awareness with your child. When your child is sucking his thumb, ask him: "Do you know you are sucking your thumb now?" If he says no, help him recognise that, and find another way to soothe him if he needs it, like a blanket or stuffed animal.
6. Don't use the nasty-tasting stuff that is marketed to stop thumb sucking and finger sucking. It's just cruel. It's like pulling the rug out from under your child and that's not fair.

7. Do come up with creative ways to help your child understand that he is growing up and one day won't suck his thumb anymore. Ask your child if he thinks his older friends (naming) suck their thumbs. In this way, they'll think about, and start to process whether they want to be sucking their thumbs anymore.
8. Don't try a glove or a mitten on the hand as a quick-fix to thumb or finger sucking. This will just frustrate him and cause more anxiety. Likely, they're old enough to just take it off, and as a result, they'll just want to suck more.
9. Do remember that a child will grow out of the need for thumb sucking or finger sucking when he's good and ready. While parents may not like it, it's best to leave their children alone. Children will eventually give it up.

Instructions

1. Offer soothing alternative options to your child if he sucks his thumb to self-soothe. Such soothing alternative options include rocking, a massage or a warm bath.
2. Give positive reinforcement, such as praise, a kiss or a preferred activity when your child does not suck his thumb and is not verbally reminded when he puts his thumb in his mouth. A good idea would be to provide a colourful visual reminder of his progress by posting a daily chart.
3. Distract your child with activities that involve both hands, or offer a preferred activity if he sucks his thumb in response to boredom. For example, ask your child to assist you with a household chore, serve him a snack, or give him some crayons and paper.
4. Demonstrate soothing alternative activities if your child sucks his thumb in response to anxiety. Calming activities for your child may include taking a walk, listening to his favourite music and sharing a glass of milk. Praise your child when he opts for an alternative activity. Try to eliminate known sources of anxiety in his environment.

5. Limit the places where your child can suck his thumb, and gradually place greater restrictions on the behaviour. For example, tell your child he may suck his thumb in the kitchen, living room and bathroom, and restrict sucking his thumb in these areas a week later. After another week, tell him thumb-sucking is permitted in the kitchen only. Your child may be willing to give up his treasured thumb when he sees he is successful without it most of the time.

Some useful tips

1. Explain to your child the plan to help him stop sucking his thumb and stop any attempts to break the habit when he seems scared or angry.
2. Avoid turning the effort into will or desire.
3. Don't tell your child: "You are a big child now" or use any negative labels regarding thumb-sucking.
4. Make your child think it was his idea. Nagging will not do any good to either of you. Instead, encourage him to realise how much he has grown and changed. Show your child what he has left behind in the name of maturity. Point out that he no longer uses nappies, bottles, or high chairs. Tell your child how proud you are of him. Ask him what else he thinks he should give up. If he doesn't say thumb sucking, then you should suggest it.
5. Weaken the habit. When you notice your child's thumb in his mouth, try to distract him. Try to engage your child in an activity that involves both hands. This is particularly important before nap time and bedtime. Have him hold the book you are reading or hug a stuffed animal with both arms.
6. Help your child notice. When your child wants to give up thumb sucking, tell him about a habit you gave up and how hard it was. Then decide on a secret signal between the two of you. When your child subconsciously slips his thumb in his mouth – and he will – you can use the secret signal to help him notice. By using a secret signal, you replace what could be a shameful situation with fun.
7. Use authority. Comments from your child's paediatrician and dentist can help. These persons of authority are constantly present in his life.

They may help reinforce the message that he wants to stop thumb sucking because he is growing up.

8. Consider peer pressure. Friends are very important to this age group. Having a sleepover with friends who do not suck their thumbs can be very helpful. If your child sucks his thumb and their friends mention it, this might be the motivation they need to stop.

