

Thumb and Pacifier Sucking

*The University of Pittsburgh
Office of Child Development*

Giving Elise a pacifier was her father's idea. He is a stay-at-home dad who doubles as a marketing consultant. A pacifier, he reasoned, might soothe four-month-old Elise when she is irritable and buy him a few more hours to focus on his home-based business.

The pacifier is doing the trick. But he is catching flak from his wife and Elise's grandmothers. The grandmothers detest the pacifier as an unnecessary, foolish habit that is hard to break. His wife worries about the alignment of Elise's teeth.

Adult feelings about children sucking thumbs and pacifiers can be intense. But neither habit is likely to harm a child.

Although most infants try to suck something besides the breast or bottle nipple, only one in two will develop a long-term thumb or pacifier habit.

Sucking on something does indeed calm infants. If you do not favor thumb or pacifier sucking, try calming your infant by holding, rocking, talking, or singing. Also, if you do use a pacifier, use it sparingly. For example, a pacifier used only to soothe tender gums while teething is less likely to develop into a full-blown habit.

Most children give up the thumb or pacifier before they get their permanent teeth, so serious dental problems are unlikely.

But know that pacifiers wear out. The nipple can crack and break off, causing a risk of choking. If your child uses a pacifier, regularly examine it closely by pulling on the nipple. If it is cracked, throw the pacifier away.

Most children outgrow a thumb or pacifier habit on their own. Otherwise, breaking the habit can be difficult. The thumb is always available. You can try to distract a thumb-sucker with activities that require using his or her hands, such as playing with blocks or a puzzle.

In the extreme, you might reward your child with a sticker or a snack for each day he or she goes without sucking. If the child is old enough, explain why it is important to stop. Say, for example, "You will look more grown up."

If you try to break your child's habit, be patient, expect setbacks, and don't threaten. You don't want a power struggle. But you must be consistent – just stop it.

Pacifier or thumb sucking rarely develops into a serious problem, and most professionals don't discourage it. But if you don't want your child to do it, don't start it. Preventing the habit from developing in the first place may be easier than trying to correct a well-practiced habit later.

This column is written by Robert B. McCall, Ph.D., Co-Director of the University of Pittsburgh Office of Child Development and Professor of Psychology, and is provided as a public service by the Frank and Theresa Caplan Fund for Early Childhood Development and Parenting Education.