

## I DECLARE A THUMB WAR

Are you and your child in a constant battle about thumb sucking? This habit is very common in toddlers and young children and usually does not cause problems if stopped by age 3. But what happens if they continue thumb or finger sucking, or even pacifier use past that point? What harm can it do if it makes them happy or gives them comfort?

A long-term finger, thumb sucking or pacifier habit can cause the front teeth to be pushed forward and the lower teeth back, creating what some call “buck teeth.” It can also keep the back molars from touching, which allows them to erupt downward and be pushed inward by the cheek muscles. This creates what we call an “open bite” where the front teeth do not overlap. To create the seal needed to swallow, the tongue fills the hole. Repeated countless times a day, this action creates pressure against the front teeth and keeps them pushed forward. With the teeth and tongue too far forward, speech problems and difficulty when eating may occur.

In more compliant children, patience and continued encouragement with verbal reminders can help them stop the habit during the day. Stopping at night might be more difficult. Pacifier removal can be a covert operation by taking all the pacifiers and giving them to the “Tooth Fairy” at your child’s dentist visit. Because thumbs and fingers are always available, you may need to call in tactical support. Over-the-counter remedies like thumb covers or painting the thumb with a bad tasting liquid may work on mild cases. For more severe and longer lasting habits, a thumb guard placed by an orthodontist or pediatric dentist may be indicated. Parents should remind their children that having a thumb guard placed is not punishment, but a means of helping them stop a habit that is not good for them. It is always best to address this problem as soon as possible and before the child gets too old, but what is the earliest age this guard would be tolerated? That depends on the child. Your best bet would be to ask your dentist for his/her evaluation.

If a child is unwilling to stop, most attempts will fail. Individual desire and willingness to quit, as well as the child’s emotional maturity, are keys to successfully stopping the habit. Having an effective battle plan and an ally is the best way to declare a “cease fire” in the thumb wars at your house!

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