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Thumb, Finger and Pacifier Habits

Why do children suck on fingers, pacifiers or other objects?

This type of sucking is completely normal for babies and young children. It provides security. For young babies, it is a way to make contact with and learn about the world. In fact, babies begin to suck on their fingers or thumbs even before they are born.

Are these habits bad for the teeth?

Most children stop sucking on thumbs, pacifiers or other objects on their own between 2 and 4 years of age. However, some children continue these habits over long periods of time. In these children, the upper front teeth may tip toward the lip or not come in properly. Frequent or intense habits over a prolonged period of time can affect the way the child's teeth bite together, as well as the growth of the jaws and bones that support the teeth.

When should I worry about a sucking habit?

Your pediatric dentist will carefully watch the way your child's teeth erupt and jaws develop, keeping the sucking habit in mind at all times. Because persistent habits may cause long term problems, intervention may be recommended for children beyond 3 years of age.

What can I do to stop my child's habit?

Most children stop sucking habits on their own, but some children need the help of their parents and their pediatric dentist. When your child is old enough to understand the possible results of a sucking habit, your pediatric dentist can encourage your child to stop, as well as talk about what happens to the teeth and jaws if your child does not stop. This advice, coupled with support from parents, helps most children quit. If this approach does not work, your pediatric dentist may recommend ways to change the behavior, including a mouth appliance that interferes with sucking habits.

Are pacifiers a safer habit for the teeth than thumbs or fingers?

Thumb, finger and pacifier sucking affect the teeth and jaws in essentially the same way. However, a pacifier habit often is easier to break.