



Like many parents, you may be concerned about your child's thumbsucking, finger sucking or pacifier use. You may wonder if it is harmful, at what age it should stop, or what could happen if your child does not stop. This brochure provides information that can help put your concerns in perspective and answer some of your questions.

### **WHY DO CHILDREN SUCK ON THINGS?**

Sucking is one of a baby's natural reflexes. In fact, babies, begin to suck on their fingers or thumbs before they are born. As newborns get older, sucking serves many purposes. Infants and young children may suck on thumbs, fingers, pacifiers or other objects. It makes them feel secure and happy, and helps them learn about their world.

Young children also may suck to soothe themselves. Placing a finger or thumb in their mouth provides a sense of security at difficult periods, such as being separated from their parents. Since thumbsucking is relaxing, it may also help induce sleep. For this reason, young children often suck in the evenings or at other times when they are tired.

### **CAN PROBLEMS RESULT FROM PROLONGED THUMB AND FINGER SUCKING?**

Yes, but not until the permanent front teeth come in (beginning about age six). After that, sucking may cause problems with the proper growth of the mouth and alignment of the teeth. It can also cause changes in the roof of the mouth.

The intensity of the sucking is a factor that determines whether or not dental problems may result. Children who rest their thumbs passively in their mouths are less likely to have difficulty than those who vigorously suck their thumbs. When the thumb is removed from the mouths of active thumbsuckers, a "popping" sound often is heard. Some aggressive thumbsuckers may cause problems with their baby (primary) teeth. If you notice changes in your child's primary teeth, consult your child's dentist.

### **IS SUCKING A PACIFIER LESS HARMFUL?**

Pacifiers can affect the teeth essentially the same way as sucking fingers and thumbs. However, pacifier use is often an easier habit to break.

If you offer your baby a pacifier, use a clean one. Never dip a pacifier in sugar or honey before giving it to a baby.



### **WHEN SHOULD THUMBSUCKING STOP?**

Most children stop on their own between the ages of two and four years. Sucking gradually lessens during this period, as children spend more of their waking hours exploring their surroundings. Peer pressure also causes many school-aged children to stop.

If a child does not stop on his or her own, the habit should be discouraged after age four.

### **HOW CAN I HELP MY CHILD BREAK THE HABIT?**

Excessive pressure can do more harm than good. Here are a few tips to consider:

- Instead of scolding your child for sucking, offer praise for not sucking.
- Remember that children often suck their thumbs when feeling insecure or seeking comfort. Focus on correcting the cause of the anxiety and comfort your child.
- Reward your child when he or she avoids sucking during difficult periods, such as separated from you.
- Your child's dentist can encourage children to stop sucking and explain what could happen to their teeth if he or she does not stop.



If these approaches do not work, remind your child of the habit by bandaging the thumb or putting a sock over the hand at night. If the sucking persists, talk to your child's dentist or pediatrician. The use of a mouth appliance or a medication to coat the thumb may be prescribed to prevent the sucking.

