

Breaking detrimental oral habits in young kids

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It's very common for babies and young children to have what dentists call "non-nutritive sucking" behaviors in which they regularly suck on a pacifier, thumb, finger(s) or other objects.

These habits can be beneficial for infants but, if continued over time, can impact your child's oral health and development. It is recommended to work with your dentist or oral health care provider to end these habits at or before 36 months of age.

In honor of National Children's Dental Health Month, Dr. Katherine Fleming, assistant professor of pediatric dentistry in the School of Dental Medicine, and Dr. Tiana Piscitelli, first-year resident, share tips for breaking common oral habits in kids.

Here are some tips to help break the habit:

- You know your child better than anyone—consider what strategies will work best for them.
- Use [positive reinforcement](#) rather than punishment.
- For [older children](#), use this as an opportunity to teach [self-awareness](#) and keep a daily record with your child's involvement. Set attainable goals such as no thumb sucking or pacifier use for the hour before bedtime and work your way up to full days. Let your child help determine their reward for success.
- Distract your child and keep them busy with fun activities such as crafts, a walk, or a fun game during the time of day that they'd typically be engaging in the habit.

For thumb/ finger sucking:

- Offer gentle reminders when you see your child sucking their thumb or fingers.
- Gloves, mittens, or an oversized t-shirt can help cover your child's hand. These options work well overnight. You can also make a "sleeve" by cutting off the top of a tube sock. This sleeve goes over the child's elbow and is a gentle reminder when they catch themselves bending their arm to put a thumb or finger in

their mouth. Finger/thumb guards are also available for purchase.

- Be easy on your child (and yourself!). Thumb or finger sucking is a difficult habit to break and many children naturally outgrow it.
- If the habit does continue as your child gets older, your dentist will let you know if an appliance is an option. There are several fixed or removable appliances that can help end a thumb or finger sucking habit.

For pacifiers:

- Read a book about ending pacifier use with your child. There are many great options available, including some that can introduce the idea of the "Pacifier Fairy" to your little one.
- You can try weaning your child off the pacifier by gradually decreasing its size. Start by snipping off just the tip of the pacifier and increasingly snip more and more off over time. You can also purchase sets with increasingly smaller pacifier tips.
- Some children respond better to ending the habit cold turkey. If you decide to go this route, there are many positive and creative ways to tell your child that is time to let their pacifier go, depending upon their age. You could try trading it into the "Pacifier Fairy" for a special toy or prize. You could hold a graduation ceremony to celebrate your child being done with their pacifier and send the pacifier off in style.
- Replace the pacifier with another comfort item, such as a teddy bear or blanket. You can even have stuffed animals made with the pacifier inside them.
- Choose a date and stick to it. You might decide to end things cold turkey or simply start the process but, no matter what, stay firm in your resolve. Know that it might be tough at first.

Provided by University of Connecticut

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