

HELPING YOUR CHILD STOP THUMB SUCKING



FOR CHILDREN AGES 1-3

Written from the perspective of a pediatric dentist and an orofacial myofunctional therapist



Thumb sucking is a normal newborn reflex, and most toddlers ease out of it on their own. Between ages 1 and 3 there's rarely a need to rush — but building gentle habits now makes weaning easier later, and it's worth knowing what to watch for.



WHY IT MATTERS

THE PEDIATRIC DENTIST'S VIEW

- Frequent, forceful sucking can gradually shift how the front teeth and jaw grow.
- Risk of lasting change rises the longer and harder the habit continues past age 3.
- Regular dental visits, starting by age 1, let us track your child's bite over time.

THE MYOFUNCTIONAL THERAPIST'S VIEW

- The mouth is a muscle system — thumb sucking changes resting tongue posture and can encourage mouth breathing.
- Watch for snoring, an open-mouth rest posture, or the tongue pushing forward at rest.
- Healthy oral habits support speech clarity, chewing, and airway development.

NORMAL BITE

Teeth meet in front



OPEN BITE

Gap from prolonged sucking



GENTLE STRATEGIES FOR AGES 1-3

- ✓ Notice the triggers - tired, bored, anxious - and offer comfort before the thumb goes in
- ✓ Praise thumb-free stretches; never punish or shame a slip
- ✓ Offer a substitute: a soft toy, blanket, or chewy/fidget item for busy hands
- ✓ Keep hands occupied at high-risk times — car rides, screen time, falling asleep
- ✓ Add oral-motor play: blowing bubbles, drinking from a straw, blowing a whistle - these build the same muscles thumb sucking can weaken
- ✓ Closer to age 3, a simple sticker chart can help if your child is ready to participate

SKIP THESE



Scolding, shaming, or pulling the thumb out by force



Bitter-tasting nail polish before age 3, or without your dentist's guidance



Expecting an overnight fix — gradual reduction works better than cold turkey

TROUBLESHOOTING

If it's not working
What to watch for, and how to get support

WHAT TO WATCH FOR



Habit still frequent or forceful past the 3rd birthday



Front teeth don't touch when your child bites down (open bite, see diagram on page 1)



Mouth breathing, snoring, or the tongue pushing forward when swallowing



T, "d," and "n" sounds still unclear past age 3 (an unclear "s" is normal until 4-5)

A SIMPLE PATH FORWARD

Habit is still frequent past your child's 3rd birthday



See your pediatric dentist for a bite and oral development check



Signs of tongue thrust or mouth breathing? Ask about a referral to an orofacial myofunctional therapist

WHEN TO SEEK HELP

Schedule a dental check by your child's 1st birthday, and again if the habit is still active past age 3.

Ask your dentist for a referral to an orofacial myofunctional therapist if you notice tongue thrust, mouth breathing, snoring, or a bite that isn't self-correcting.

Most children benefit from a structured, child-led cessation program between ages 4-6 if the habit hasn't resolved on its own by then - this is a normal, common next step, not a failure.



**GROWING HEALTHY SMILES STARTS AT HOME
— WE'RE HERE TO HELP ALONG THE WAY.**

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*Based on AAPD Policy on Pacifiers (2024)
and current orofacial myofunctional
therapy guidelines (IAOM).*