

Is thumb sucking normal?

YES. Children are born with an instinctive suckling reflex,
Many children begin sucking thumbs in utero,
Thumb/finger sucking soothes distress, illness, or fatigue,
However, after age 3 thumb sucking is a habit that needs to end:

- One-third to half of all 3-5 year olds suck fingers or thumbs when tired
- Finger/thumb sucking occurs in 13% of children entering kindergarten
- Finger/thumb sucking occurs in 6% of 7-11 year olds

Why encourage a 3 year old to stop?

Prolonged vigorous sucking deters normal growth.

- Altered development of skeletal pattern, facial form, nasal cavity, tooth alignment and eruption, lip structure, palate, speech, and breathing and swallowing functions.
- The more frequently and vigorously the fingers are sucked, the more growth is altered.

As the mouth is propped open from the thumb, the back teeth can over erupt, causing an open-bite. The force of the thumb will push the upper teeth forward and the lower teeth back, causing an open-bite.

The tongue is forced forward and downward by the thumb, which affects:

- The roof of the mouth (the palate) needs the tongue to form and shape it into a wide "U"
- The muscles of the tongue that place it in the roof of the mouth fail to develop
- The muscles of the tongue that push it forward overdevelop

The pressure from the cheeks while sucking further narrows the developing palate causing:

- Not enough space for erupting teeth, especially in the front (narrow, crooked smile)
 - Upper jaw may not fit over lower teeth, causing shifting on closing and cross-bites
 - Tongue does not fit in the roof of the mouth, furthering its tendency to push forward
 - Imbalance of facial muscles as those used for expression are now used in chewing and swallowing
- Poor air flow through the nose as the roof of mouth is also the floor of nasal cavity

Possible TMJ dysfunction later in life

- ❖ Try putting your own tongue at the floor of your mouth and see what happens - The jaw moves forward and down from normal position and the jaw muscles become strained

The older the child and the longer the habit, the harder it is to break.

What can be done?

At age 3 begin planting the seeds for breaking the habit

- Your child must want to stop to be successful

Change behaviours that are tied to thumb sucking (i.e. watching TV, holding a favourite blanket) Keep your child's fingers busy at times of the day when they tend to suck their thumb

- play dough, koosh balls, silly putty, or legos are good at keeping little hands busy

Give positive reinforcement and praise your child when the thumb is not in their mouth

Designate a special place (their room) for thumb sucking. Everywhere else is a thumb-free zone.

A dental appliance can be placed in the roof of the mouth to remind/encourage your child to keep their thumb out.

Signs and symptoms thumb-sucking is causing a problem

V-shaped upper arch and/or open bite

Tongue visibly forward during eating or at rest

Tongue comes forward into cup when drinking

Lips apart during rest and/or while swallowing

Facial grimace and/or chin dimpling (like a golf ball) when swallowing

Child's head bobs forward when swallowing