

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
 - 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

