



The Dangers of Prolonged Thumb-sucking and Pacifier Use

by Kyle Dosch, DDS

(NAPS)—While it is normal for small children to use a pacifier or their thumb to calm down or to stop crying, prolonged usage of either can lead to oral health problems down the line.

In general, according to the American Academy of Pediatric Dentistry, children up to the age of three will not face issues from the use of pacifiers or thumb-sucking, but if they keep that habit up as they age there can be major issues with their bite, their teeth, chewing, how their mouth rests and problems with their tongue.

Understanding Pacifiers

There are two types of pacifiers: conventional and orthodontic. Orthodontic pacifiers are generally flat bottomed and square, designed to imitate the shape of the mother's nipple. Conventional pacifiers—which are often the type sent home with newborns from the hospital—tend to be round. While either option will soothe a child, the orthodontic pacifiers are the least likely to contribute to bite issues after teething.

These habits tend to persist because of physical and emotional stimuli, including boredom, hunger, stress, hyperactivity, pleasure, sadness and various kinds of disabilities. An increase in your child's level of stress or anxiety can lead to the continuation of the thumb-sucking habit beyond a healthy age.

The Problems

There are five main issues that may arise from prolonged thumb-sucking or pacifier use:

- **Open bite:** Upper and lower teeth don't touch when the mouth is closed.
- **Increased overjet:** Upper jaw and teeth protrude excessively forward.
- **Chewing difficulty:** Upper and lower teeth don't articulate correctly to provide a solid chewing surface.
- **Cross bite:** Upper back teeth sit inside the bottom teeth and appear tilted inward toward the tongue, instead of lining up straight and fitting into each other.



Thumb-sucking, finger-sucking or pacifier use should be discontinued before a child reaches three years of age. These habits can harm the eruption and position of the permanent teeth and affect the health of surrounding oral tissues.

- **Tongue thrust compensation:** An infant generally pushes their tongue out when swallowing, while children and adults rest the tongue against the roof of their mouth.

All five of these issues can cause too much pressure on teeth and jaw, leading to speech impediments, issues with facial development and gum problems—they can also eventually require surgery.

Some Answers

There are no ready-made recipes for stopping your child from thumb sucking or using a pacifier, but some of the more popular deterrents include:

- Adhesive plaster or tape on the digit
- Verbal reminders
- Reward systems
- Mittens
- Fidget spinners
- A replacement object to soothe your child, such as a blanket or toy
- Oral appliances
- Braces

Remember, children use their a thumb or a pacifier for a reason, so offering encouragement and helping them come up with other solutions to overcome boredom or anxiety is the way to go.

• *Dr. Dosch is Delta Dental of Washington's dental director.*