

## DEFINITION

- A child sucks on the thumb or fingers when not hungry.
- A security object, such as a blanket, may become part of the ritual.
- Thumb sucking begins before birth or by 3 months of age at the latest.

## Causes

An infant's desire to suck on the breast or bottle is a drive that is essential for survival. More than 80% of babies also do some extra sucking when they are not hungry (non-nutritive sucking). Thumb sucking also helps a child comfort herself. It does not mean that a child is insecure or has emotional problems.

## Expected Course

The sucking need is strongest during the first 6 months of a child's life. By 4 years of age, only 15% of children still suck their thumbs. Those children who continue sucking their thumbs after 4 years of age often have become involved in a power struggle with a parent who tried to stop their thumb sucking at too young an age. Occasionally the thumb sucking simply persists as a bad habit. Thumb sucking must be stopped before a child's permanent teeth erupt (6 or 7 years of age), because it can lead to an overbite ("buck teeth").

## HOW TO OVERCOME THUMB SUCKING

1. **Before 4 years of age, distract or ignore.** Thumb sucking should be considered normal before the age of 4 years, especially when your child is tired. However, if the thumb sucking occurs when your child is bored and she is over 1 year old, try to distract her. Give her something to do with her hands without mentioning your concern about the thumb sucking. Occasionally praise your child for not thumb sucking. Until your child is old enough for you to reason with her, any pressure or punishment you apply to stop thumb sucking will only lead to increased thumb sucking.
2. **Daytime control.** After 4 years of age, help your child give up thumb sucking during the day. First get your child's commitment to giving up thumb sucking by showing her what thumb sucking is doing to her body. Show her the gap between her teeth with a mirror. Have her look at the wrinkled rough skin (callus) on her thumb. Appeal to her sense of pride. At this point most children will agree that they would like to stop thumb sucking.  
Ask your child if it will be all right if you remind

her when she forgets. Do this gently with comments such as "Guess what?" and put an arm around your child as she remembers that she has been sucking on her thumb again. Encourage your child to remind herself by painting a star on her thumb with a Magic Marker, putting a Band-Aid on the thumb, or applying fingernail polish. Your child should put these reminders on herself. Praise your child whenever you notice she is not sucking her thumb in situations where she previously did. Also, give her a reward (such as a dime, a snack, or an extra story) at the end of any day during which she did not suck her thumb at all.

3. **Nighttime control.** After daytime control is established, help your child give up thumb sucking during sleep. Thumb sucking during naps and night is usually an involuntary process. Your child can be told that although the nighttime thumb sucking is not her fault, she can learn not to suck her thumb during sleep by putting something on her thumb to remind her. A glove, sock, splint (thumb guard), or piece of adhesive tape that runs up one side and down the other can be used. Your child should be in charge of putting on whatever material is used to prevent thumb sucking or asking you for assistance. Help your child look on this method as a clever idea rather than any kind of penalty.
4. **Bitter-tasting medicines.** Consider using bitter-tasting medicines if your child is over 4 years of age. A recent study by Dr. P. C. Friman demonstrated a high success rate in 1 to 3 nights using a bitter-tasting solution called Stop-zit (no prescription necessary) in combination with a reward system. Use Stop-zit only if your child is over 4 years old and agrees to use it. Don't use it as a punishment. Present it as a reminder that "other kids like to use it also." Help your child apply Stop-zit only to the thumbnail at the following times: (1) before breakfast, (2) before bedtime, and (3) whenever thumb sucking is observed day or night.  
Look to see whether your child is thumb sucking every 30 minutes after her bedtime until you retire. After 5 nights without thumb sucking, discontinue the morning Stop-zit. After 5 more nights without any thumb sucking, stop using Stop-zit at bedtime. If the thumb sucking recurs, repeat this program.
5. **Dental help.** Bring thumb sucking to the attention of your child's dentist at least by the time your child is 6 years old. Dentists have a variety of approaches to thumb sucking. By the time a child is 7 or 8 years old, dentists can place a reminder bar in the upper part of the mouth that interferes with the ability to suck. This helpful appliance does not cause any pain to your child but may spare you the later economic pain of \$4000 worth of orthodontic treatment.