Thumb-Sucking



Thumb-sucking can have a big impact on the position of children's teeth, and on their speech.

Position of Teeth:

When children suck their thumb or fingers, it changes the pressure in the mouth. It makes strong pressure that pushes out against the front teeth.

Sucking thumbs and fingers also changes the position of the tongue in the mouth. While sucking, the tongue sits under the thumb. This makes it come out through the teeth. If a child sucks their thumb a lot, their tongue sticks out a lot. Then a child's tongue often starts sticking out even when they're not sucking their thumb.

This tongue-forward position often makes a child use a tongue-forward swallow as well. This is a swallow where the child's tongue pushes forwards against their teeth, instead of up into the roof of the mouth. This makes more pressure pushing out against the front of the teeth.



Over time, the tongue position and the pressure can make the teeth stick out. We call this an 'open bite'. An open bite can make biting food harder. It can lead to expensive orthodontic treatment later in childhood.

Speech sounds:

A forward position for the tongue can also change how a child says some speech sounds. It may cause any or all of these problems in speech:

- Lisp
- Weak pronunciation of /r/
- An immature or 'young sounding' quality of vowels
- General mumbliness and imprecision of speech

These differences in teeth position and speech are caused by the too-far-forward tongue position. To help a child make speech changes we need to change the behaviours that cause the forward position of the tongue.



What can we do to stop thumb sucking?

Thumb-sucking is a powerful comfort for many children. They cannot stop sucking their thumb quickly. They need kind, supportive patience and different comfort activities to use instead. The following suggestions have helped many parents help their children to change their habits:

<u>Behaviour Modification Approach</u>

At its simplest this means to:

- Reward the behaviour you want.
- Remove reward from the behaviour you don't want.

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The behaviour we want is "no sucking". But often we don't notice when the child is *not* sucking. We only notice when the child *is* sucking. This can make it hard to reward the behaviour we want.

If we only notice and comment "don't suck your thumb!" when the child is sucking their thumb, it feels like nagging. The child will have negative feelings about their thumb-sucking. They might get upset and stop listening to you. We need to avoid these negative feelings.

Behaviour change happens faster if **we** change what **we** notice and comment on. We need to notice when the child is **not** sucking. Then we can reward the child for not sucking.

It is best to say things like:

- Hey! Your thumb is dry, well done!
- You're using your finger fidget, that's awesome!

Instead of saying things like:

- Hey, you're not sucking your thumb, well done!

We need to make sure we do **6 positive** "your thumb is dry!" comments for every "oops, take your thumb out of your mouth!" comment. This supports the child to feel valued and to want to make the change. It also makes sure we are rewarding the right behaviour. Sometimes parents put 6 rubber bands on their wrist to remind them to make 6 positive comments.

It also works well to change the rewards. Sometimes give spoken praise. Sometimes use sticker charts or other small items.

<u>Avoid Situations that Lead to Thumb-Sucking</u>

Most children who suck their thumbs do it for comfort. This means they are more likely to suck their thumb in certain times/places or when they are feeling certain emotions. Parents, and the child, often know when the child is more likely to suck their thumb.

If we avoid these times, we avoid the child sucking their thumb out of habit. For example, if your child sucks their thumb while watching TV, try some different quiet activities. Activities that they need to use their hands for can work well. This could be drawing, reading, computer games. This works best if you can join your child. Such activities also give you lovely times to spend with your child and give praise for keeping their thumb dry.

<u>Providing Other Comforts</u>

It is important that we give the child a different comfort or fidget tool when we help them stop sucking their thumb.

- During the day it could be small fidget tools they can use in their hands.
- You might also need chewing gum or a chewy necklace, to give the right mouth and hand sensory feel.
- At bedtime you could try a teddy, back-rubs, songs, night lights, holding hands. This will give comfort and help them relax, even without sucking their thumb.

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