

Fact Sheet

Myths about thumb and finger sucking

There are so many opinions about digit sucking children from professionals and parents.

1. “Kids who suck their fingers and thumbs have emotional problems.”

Most kids who suck their fingers and thumbs come from extremely caring homes with very loving and attentive parents. Sometimes children have emotional issues or problems with anxiety, and these kids may need to be referred to a child psychologist or paediatrician to overcome their difficulties. These children often NEED their sucking to cope in their world and it is important that this is recognised otherwise any attempt to stop the habit will be fruitless.

2. “It’s the parent’s fault.”

Sucking is a natural instinct for babies. As infants, the first contact a baby usually has with sucking is at their mother’s breast to drink breast milk. Milk contains a protein that is converted into serotonin in the brain and creates a sleepy, tired, relaxed feeling. And children who become attached to sucking as they get older still get a physiological payoff every time they do it. Prolonged and vigorous sucking results in decreased neurotransmissions in the brain and the chemicals serotonin and dopamine are released – the body’s very own natural addictive opiate.

There are very few ways to mimic this amazing sensation. Many parents say that when they get upset or try to discipline their child over their sucking, ironically, the sucking worsens.

By the time parents get to us, they usually have tried every trick in the book to stop the sucking. Don’t blame the parents. Trust us, they are doing the very best they can.

3. “Stop kids sucking as early as possible.”

It’s true, the earlier a child stops sucking the better. But before 12 months, mouthing is normal and we need to provide optimum opportunities for kids to suck and chew on appropriate toys. By doing this, babies should turn into kids that have had optimal oral experiences and sucking habits lapse.

At the age of 4 and a half to 5 years old - the so called “Magic Age” children are bright and receptive and are often ready to stop their sucking.... This is a great age to begin a formalized program.

Any mechanical or aversive approach to stopping a child younger than 5 can result in withdrawals (don’t laugh!! Remember the body’s natural chemical opiates!) including bad behaviour and transfer to another habit (think nail biting, cheek chewing, clothes chewing).

As mentioned earlier, children under 5 years are little people, many are still babies really. Age 5 is the time when children can understand other people’s points of view. They are able to take a bit more responsibility and they usually really want to please. This is the best time for a behaviour modification program to be initiated and the best chance for success.

4. “It’s just defiance.”

It is true that children who suck are often highly emotional, extremely intelligent little people. But surprisingly, often the act of defiance and continued sucking is because the children themselves don’t know how to stop.

5. “It doesn’t cause any harm.”

That depends on each individual child. It depends specifically on **duration, intensity and frequency**. It depends on HOW they suck, what digits they suck (finger suckers tend to have a higher palate). Some kids put pressure on their teeth, some kids put pressure on their palate, and others will put pressure on their lower jaw. Some children will need surgery to correct skeletal deformities related to digit sucking. Generally, thumb and digit sucking will usually have some form of impact on dental growth and development.

The biggest concern with digit sucking is that it results in improper tongue and lip rest postures and functions in childhood which influences how the child’s face and jaws develop.

6. “They will grow out of it.”

Um.....sorry, not necessarily. Simply Google “adult thumbsucking” and you will get 42 000 results. There are websites dedicated to this habit. Famous suckers include Rhianna and Amy Winehouse. If you ask around, guaranteed, you will find someone with a grown up son, a cousin, a hairdresser or a husband (NOT kidding) who STILL sucks their digit in adulthood. Adults simply become better at hiding their habits, and it is often used as an emotional crutch or simply for relaxation.

