

SUGGESTIONS FOR OVERCOMING DIGIT SUCKING HABITS

It is generally accepted in the dental literature that digit sucking may create bite problems (malocclusions). These may take the form of open bites, overbites, or crossbites, to mention a few. These bite problems tend to self-correct if the digit sucking habit is stopped by age 4 or so. Most children stop these habits by this time anyway, so intervention may not be needed. Not all children are willing to discontinue this pleasurable habit, however, and may continue to suck their fingers, thumb, or pacifier past the age of four. It is very important to realize that unless the child shows a willingness to discontinue their habit, little can be done successfully to intervene. Placing excessive negative pressure on them at this time may aggravate the condition.

Behavior Modification:

For those children who do not discontinue their digit sucking habit on their own, or when advised to do so by parent, dentist or physician, behavior modification techniques may be employed in encouraging the child to "want to stop".

Positive reinforcement from the parent may be offered by appealing to the child's desire to be more "grown-up". Phrases such as "you are getting to be such a grown-up boy/girl", or "mom and dad are so proud of you". Avoid negative comments and/or punishment.

Utilizing a goal and reward system can be helpful. A chart or calendar can be used and stars or stickers placed when the goal is attained. It is very important to make the goals easily attainable in the beginning (i.e. 30 minutes without sucking the digit earns the child a sticker for the day). Make the goals increasingly more difficult as the frequency of the habit decreases, rewarding accordingly.

Many children learn to discontinue their habit during the waking hours, only to unconsciously resort to digit sucking when falling asleep. This can be helped by various methods. Help the child wrap an ace bandage loosely around the favorite digit and at least one other digit, and extend it up past the elbow. Paint-on bitters are available as well, as an alternative. It is very important to solicit the child's participation in the above techniques; you are simply helping the child to "help themselves". This keeps the behavior modification on a positive level. Digit habits are often accompanied by "warm fuzzies", such as a favorite blanket, piece of cloth, stuffed animal, etc. Suggesting that these items be carefully stored away in the evening, and ultimately discontinued may be helpful.

Every child is different. No single behavioral modification technique is going to work for every child. Choose one that you feel will work best for both you and your child. We realize that this is not always an easy task to attain. We are here to help you. Please feel free to call us or ask the next time you visit with us. Good Luck!



Dr. Ewers & Staff
630-833-1166
www.DentistryForKids.com