

Thumb Sucking: Should Parents Be Concerned



Watching an infant develop from a little bundle of joy to a rambunctious toddler is a delight for parents. Amid the heartfelt joy, there will be occasions where moms and dads will raise reasonable concerns over their little one's behavior. One of the common queries over their children's habits frequently raised in a clinical setting revolves around thumb-sucking.

"Is thumb sucking harmful to a child's development?"

Specifically, in the context of dental health; *"Will it affect how a child's teeth grow?"*

The following article will help curious parents navigate the mind-boggling world of thumb sucking among children. More importantly, it will alert parents when a mere innocent activity becomes a red flag for their little ones.

Thumb Sucking Is Harmless, to a Certain Extent

First of all, parents should be reassured that thumb sucking is a normal process, a fact that is widely informed by the American Dental Association. The practice, which is part of natural rooting and sucking reflexes, begins as early as the womb and persists after birth. Some children find thumb sucking comforting and may revert to the behavior during times of distress. Otherwise, most children outgrow this behavior by 6 or 7 months or between ages 2 and 4.

When Should Parents Be Worried

According to the American Academy of Pediatrics, intervention should be initiated for children who habitually thumb-suck at the age of 5. Some groups of experts argue that an earlier intervention before the age of 3 would prove to be beneficial to the child.

This is because once a child's permanent teeth appear, rigorous thumb sucking can contribute to teeth misalignment and palatal (related to the roof of the mouth) misdevelopment.

How Can Parents Help Their Child Overcome Thumb-Sucking Habit

Parents who wish to be proactive at curbing the habit of thumb sucking can effectively start at home by talking to their child. Explaining to them in a manner that they understand the potential damage of thumb sucking is the first step to overcoming the habit. Parents should also apply the following techniques to remedy the issue if an initial conversation is not sufficient.

1. Ignore thumb-sucking behavior if a child utilizes it as an attention-grabbing mechanism.
2. Positively reinforce a child when they are not thumb-sucking through verbal praises and tangible rewards.
3. Remove children from triggers that initiate thumb sucking behaviors or redirect them to healthier modes of emotional relief.
4. Seek professional help from a dentist or orthodontist for expert assistance.
5. Try a special device (dental appliance) recommended by your dentist or orthodontist.