

## How do I stop my child from sucking his/her finger?



Every baby has the need to suck his/her finger to reproduce the pleasure they associate with their mother (feeding, security, warmth, caring, calm). However, from the two years of age on, sucking is no longer considered a natural need, but a habit.

Some babies suck their finger or the pacifier with great avidity before falling asleep; while they sleep or if they are frustrated or anxious. This habit can alter the shape of the teeth and of the maxillary muscles, and can also cause an incorrect bite (malocclusion) or alterations of the position of the tongue and face muscles.



However, it is significant to point out that **the emotional development of the baby or the child is more important than the early rectification of the incorrect bite.** The pediatric doctor, together with the parents, must determine whether the child needs additional emotional support, as well as the right moment to correct the habit of finger sucking.

Finger sucking is a difficult habit to quit and it has more serious oral consequences than the pacifier. For this reason we try that babies and small children who constantly suck their fingers switch to the pacifier.

### ***Achieve a change in habits***

As babies need to satisfy their need of sucking, it takes time, patience and a lot of security from both their father and mother to achieve the baby to stop sucking his/her finger or the pacifier.

The finger is a prolongs the pleasant sensations of the bond with the mother (feeding, security, affection, warmth, calm, protection, etc.) This is why ending the sucking habit must be

accompanied by an extra dose of pampering, cuddling and attentions.



### ***General guidelines:***

- If your child is still a baby and she/he sucks her/his finger constantly and intensely try to give her/him the pacifier. It is not immediately easy: at first they reject it. **You must be patient and try to perform the change gradually and affectionately.** The change takes less than a week of constant tries.
- After breastfeeding or the bottle, when you still have the baby in your arms, slowly introduce the pacifier into his/her mouth, putting the tip in contact with the lips to stimulate the sucking reflex. Once inside the baby's mouth you must pull the pacifier backwards, taking it out from eight to ten times, to encourage muscle tiring. If the baby is satisfied, because of the suction

and the maternal warmth, he/she will leave the pacifier and sleep with the mouth closed.

- If your child is more than a year old and constantly sucks his/her finger or the pacifier, **identify the moments when he/she does it** (to fall asleep, to get distracted in front of the TV, to relax in the pram, to calm down when he/she is irritated, etc.)



- Once you have identified the reason, try to distract the child with other activities before they put their finger into their mouth. For example: if children suck their finger before falling asleep, you can lay them down and distract them by reading them a story or singing them a song, gently massaging their little hands. To make a child quit the habit of sucking his/her finger or the pacifier **you must offer him/her more pleasant options than the habit itself.**
- If we accomplish to incorporate more satisfying options during these key moments, finger-sucking will lose importance because the child will feel equally loved, relaxed and calm in the company of his/her parents. The new sensations will replace the habit of sucking for something a lot better.

- When children are older than two we can count on a little comprehension on their part. **If the child understands the negative effect of finger-sucking or the pacifier on their mouth it will be easier for them to quit it.**



We must never ridicule a child for sucking his/her finger or pacifier, because **negatively reinforced conducts become more difficult to quit.** The habit must not take all of our attention.

The same as with adults, **habits are abandoned after a learning process** that is usually slow and varies a lot from person to person. We all have our own rhythm and must respect it.

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