

Babies vary in how much extra sucking they do when they are not feeding. This extra sucking is a beneficial self-comforting behavior. Some babies almost constantly suck on their thumb or fingers. If you have a baby like this, you may want to try to interest him in a pacifier. The pacifier has to be introduced during the first month or two of life for it to be accepted as a substitute for the thumb. Although the orthodontic type of pacifier is preferred because it prevents tongue thrusting during sucking, the regular type usually causes no problems. By trial and error, let your baby find the shape he prefers.

ADVANTAGES OF A PACIFIER OVER THUMB SUCKING

The main advantage of a pacifier is that if you can get your child to use one, he usually won't be a thumb sucker. Thumb sucking can cause a severe overbite if it is continued after the permanent teeth come in. The pacifier exerts less pressure on the teeth and causes much less overbite than the thumb. In addition, the pacifier's use can be controlled as your child grows older. You can decide when it's reasonable to discontinue it. By contrast, thumb sucking can't be stopped when you want it to, because the thumb belongs to your child.

WHEN TO OFFER THE PACIFIER

The peak age for sucking is 2 to 4 months. During the following months, the sucking drive normally decreases. A good age to make the pacifier less available is when your child starts to crawl. A pacifier can interfere with normal babbling and speech development. This is especially important after 12 months of age when speech should develop rapidly. It's hard to talk with a pacifier in your mouth. To prevent problems with pacifiers, make sure your child doesn't become overly attached to one (e.g., walks around with one in his mouth.) Consider the following recommendations for preventing excessive use and a "pacifier habit":

- During the first 6 months of life, give it to your baby whenever he wants to suck, but don't offer it whenever your baby cries. Crying has a number of causes besides hunger and sucking.
- When your older infant is stressed, first try to hold and cuddle him rather than using the pacifier for this purpose. Some infants like massage. Try not to overuse the pacifier while you are comforting him.
- After 6 months of age (or when your infant starts crawling), keep the pacifier in your child's crib. He can use it for naptime and bedtime. After your infant falls asleep, remove it from his mouth if it doesn't fall out. If you allow him to use it all the time, his interest in it will increase rather than decrease. If your child seems to want a security object while awake, offer him alternatives such as a stuffed animal.

- **Reminder:** If your baby likes the pacifier, don't forget to take it with you when you travel. Keeping a spare pacifier in the car is helpful. For air travel, sucking or swallowing fluids during descent can prevent ear pain.

PACIFIER SAFETY

Some cautions regarding the pacifier should be observed.

- Use a one-piece commercial pacifier, not a homemade one. Don't try making one yourself by taping a nipple to a plastic bottle cap. A homemade pacifier can be pulled apart, become caught in your baby's throat, and cause choking.
- Don't put the pacifier on a string around your baby's neck. The string could strangle your baby. The new "catch-it-clips" that attach the pacifier to your child's clothing on a short ribbon are practical and safe.
- Don't use pacifiers with a liquid center. (Some have been found to be contaminated with germs.)
- Don't coat it with any sweets, which may cause dental cavities if teeth have erupted.
- Don't coat it with honey, which may cause a serious disease called botulism in children less than 1 year of age.
- Rinse off the pacifier each time your baby finishes using it or if it drops to the floor.
- Replace the pacifier if it becomes damaged.

STOPPING USE OF THE PACIFIER

If the pacifier's use has been restricted to naptime and bedtime, many toddlers lose interest in it between 12 and 18 months of age. If your child continues to need the pacifier, you can introduce the idea of giving it up completely by 3 or 4 years of age. Pick a time when your child is not coping with new stresses or fears. Sometimes giving it up on a birthday, holiday, or other celebration makes it easier.

Make the transition as pleasant as possible. Sometimes incentives are needed. If your child seems especially attached to it, help him give it up at naptime first. Use a star chart to mark his progress. When that goal is accomplished, offer to replace the nighttime pacifier with a new stuffed animal or encourage him to trade it for something else he wants. Never force him to give up the pacifier through punishment or humiliation. Abruptly removing the pacifier without preparation can be psychologically harmful.

Give your child a choice such as throwing it away or leaving it out for Santa Claus or the "pacifier fairy." Saving it somewhere in the house is usually not a good idea, because your child will be more likely to ask for it during periods of stress. At such times, offer to cuddle your child instead. Help your child talk about how he misses the pacifier. Praise your child for this sign of growing up.