

# The Dangers of Prolonged Thumb-sucking and Pacifier Use

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Seeing a baby suck on a pacifier or an infant on their thumb is one of those memories a parent will keep forever. Most hospitals even send home a rubber green pacifier with a newborn baby. And while it is normal for small children to use a pacifier or their thumb to calm down or to stop crying, prolonged usage of either can lead to oral health problems down the line.

In general, according to the [American Academy of Pediatric Dentistry](#), children up to the age of three will not face issues from the use of pacifiers or thumb-sucking, but if they keep that habit up as they age there can be major issues with their bite, their teeth, chewing, how their mouth rests and problems with their tongue.

"Thumb-sucking, finger-sucking or pacifier use should be discontinued before a child reaches three years of age," said Kyle Dosch, DDS, Delta Dental of Washington's dental director. "If not stopped, these habits can harm the eruption and position of the permanent teeth, and affect the health of surrounding oral tissues."

There are two types of pacifiers: conventional and orthodontic. Orthodontic pacifiers are generally flat bottomed and square, which is designed to imitate the shape of the mother's nipple. Conventional pacifiers – which are often the type sent home with newborns from the hospital - tend to be round. While either option will soothe a child, the orthodontic pacifiers are



Thumb-sucking or pacifier use past the age of 3 can cause long-term oral health problems for your child.

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the least likely to contribute to bite issues after teething.

These habits tend to persist because of physical and emotional stimuli, including boredom, hunger, stress, hyperactivity, pleasure, sadness and various kinds of disabilities. An increase in your child's level of stress or anxiety can lead to the continuation of the thumb-sucking habit beyond a healthy age.

There are five main issues that may arise from prolonged thumb-sucking or pacifier use:

- Open bite: Upper and lower teeth don't touch when the mouth is closed.
- Increased overjet: Upper jaw and teeth protrude excessively forward.
- Chewing: Upper and lower teeth don't articulate correctly to provide a solid chewing surface.
- Cross bite: Upper back teeth sit inside the bottom teeth and appear tilted inward toward your tongue, instead of lining up straight and fitting into each other.
- Tongue thrust compensation: An infant generally pushes their tongue out when swallowing, while children and adults rest the tongue against the roof of their mouth.

All five of these issues can cause too much pressure being placed on the teeth and jaw, leading to speech impediments, issues with facial development and gum problems – they can also eventually require surgery.

There are no ready-made recipes from stopping your child from sucking their thumb, but some of the more popular methods include:

- Adhesive plaster or tape on the digit
- Verbal reminders
- Reward systems
- Mittens
- Fidget spinners
- Provide a replacement object to soothe your child, like a blanket or toy
- Oral appliances
- Braces

Remember, a child utilizes their thumb or a pacifier for a reason, so offering encouragement and helping them come up with other solutions to overcome boredom or anxiety is the way to go.

For more information on children's oral health, please visit our [blog](#).

About Delta Dental of Washington

Founded 70 years ago by Seattle area dentists who set out to revolutionize oral health care, an innovative program was developed to provide longshoremen's children access to dental care – and the concept of dental benefits was born. Today Delta Dental of Washington, a not-for-profit, is the state's leading dental benefits provider covering nearly 4 million people statewide and beyond.

Through corporate philanthropy, oral health advocacy, and funding the Arcora Foundation, Delta Dental of Washington plays a vital role in making dental care more equitable and accessible, increasing dental health education with an emphasis on youth, and expanding diversity at all levels within the dental profession. These collective efforts aim to improve oral health care in Washington so all people can enjoy good oral and overall health with no one left behind. Delta Dental of Washington is part of the Delta Dental Plans Association, consisting of 39 independent affiliated member companies. For more information, visit: [www.deltadentalwa.com](http://www.deltadentalwa.com).

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