

Habits: Thumb Sucking, Nail Biting, Etc.

Most habits are behaviors your child has developed as a way of dealing with stress. Some habits can have harmful effects; for example, thumb sucking can lead to problems with your child's teeth. Generally, the best thing to do about habits is ignore them. Rather than criticizing your child's habit, praise him or her for substituting other behaviors.

What are childhood habits?

Parents are often concerned about their children's habits, such as thumb sucking, nail biting, hair pulling, and others. Children sometimes seem to develop habits as a way of dealing with stress. At other times, they learn habits by imitating adults.

Most childhood habits are harmless. Some habits can cause physical harm, for example, possible dental problems caused by thumb sucking or tooth grinding. Other habits can be socially embarrassing or annoying. In general, it's best not to pay too much attention to your child's habit or to nag him or her about it. Children generally outgrow habits or learn to control them, especially in social situations.

Less often, habits such as head banging or hair pulling can cause pain or injury to children. These habits may develop in children who have been abused or neglected or in children with mental retardation or other forms of developmental delay. Habits are different from tics, which are repeated, involuntary movements such as facial twisting or eye blinking. Any habit that is causing physical harm or interfering with your child's life in any way should be evaluated by a doctor.

What do they look like?

Many kinds of habits may develop.

- Thumb sucking is normal in infants and toddlers but may cause problems with tooth development in some children if it is prolonged.
- Tooth grinding, especially at night (bruxism). This may cause some dental problems.
- Rocking: children may rock back and forth, often when put to bed or alone.
- Head banging—sometimes hard enough to raise fears of the child's injury to himself or herself.
- Nail biting.

- Hair twirling.
- Hair pulling—sometimes severe enough to leave bald spots (trichotillomania).

How are childhood habits managed?

General issues. Usually, no treatment is necessary. Most childhood habits go away on their own, generally within a few weeks or months.

- Try not to pay too much attention to your child's habit. Calling attention to or commenting on habits may actually reinforce them.
- Praise substitute behaviors. Give your child alternatives to the habit. For example, if you see your child biting her nails, say, "Let's take out the crayons and color." Don't comment on the nail biting at all.
- Try to reduce stress in your child's life, especially if there is any stressful situation that may be contributing to the habit.

Thumb sucking and tooth grinding. If they are severe and persistent, these habits can cause dental problems. In some children, special methods may be needed to stop them.

- Thumb sucking is normal in infants and toddlers. However, if the habit continues, it may interfere with the way your child's teeth come in. The best way to deal with thumb sucking is to praise your child when he or she isn't sucking his or her thumb or is keeping busy with other activities (like coloring or playing).
- In the past, putting bitter substances on the fingers was recommended as a way of "breaking the habit" of thumb sucking. It's not clear how well this works, so it's usually not recommended at first. If all else fails and the habit needs to be stopped, the doctor may suggest trying this approach.
- Tooth grinding may be related to anxiety. It may help to work with your child to find other ways of reducing anxiety. If the habit continues, we may recommend evaluation by a dentist.

If habits persist or are causing other problems. If habits are causing any physical harm or social embarrassment, or are interfering with your child's life in other ways, the doctor may suggest a visit to a child psychologist or other mental health professional.

 **When should I call your office?**

Call our office if:

- Your child has a habit you are concerned about, which doesn't improve or go away within a few months.
- Your child has habits that could cause him or her physical harm (for example, head banging) or are severe (for example, hair pulling that leaves bald patches).
- Your child is having social problems, problems at school or at home, or other issues that you think might be contributing to or resulting from the habit.