



# Pacifiers & Dental Issues

Call them pacifiers, soothers, dummies, or nooks – can they cause dental issues?

## What Kind of Behaviors Can Cause Dental Issues?

Parents and caretakers across the globe know very well how hard it can be for a child to break a thumb sucking or pacifier habit; however, prolonged thumb sucking or pacifier usage can cause dental issues.

Unfortunately, there hasn't been expert consensus on which age children should no longer be allowed pacifiers or encouraged to drop a thumb-sucking habit; however, it has been observed that around age one, children don't necessarily rely so heavily on sucking as a soothing method. Around age one, teeth will also start growing in, which increases the concern of dental issues stemming from pacifier usage/thumb sucking.

## How Parents and Caretakers Can Help

Starting around age two to age four, many children no longer feel the need to use a pacifier and may stop sucking behavior naturally. If, however, a child continues thumb sucking or pacifier usage past age four, parents and caretakers should consider taking additional steps in helping wean the child from the habit, as the risk of dental problems that would require professional intervention is much higher after this age.

In addition to the length of time a child uses a pacifier, parents/caretakers should also consider how vigorously the child sucks on the pacifier or their thumb. Children who tend to suck more aggressively on the pacifier/thumb are more likely to develop more severe dental issues, so they may need to be weaned from the habit sooner than children who passively suck the pacifier/thumb.

## What Kinds of Dental Issues Can Occur?

The most common issue experienced from prolonged pacifier usage or thumb sucking is a condition unofficially called pacifier teeth. This condition is generally marked by malocclusion (misalignment) of the teeth, which could include an open bite, overbite, or buck teeth.

- **Open Bite** - When a child develops an open bite, their molars and back teeth will touch when their mouth is closed; however, the teeth in the front may be angled outward and not touch at all.
- **Overbite** – Also common, an overbite can develop, where the upper teeth may be angled outward, but will protrude a ways past the lower teeth, sometimes covering the lower teeth altogether.
- **Buck Teeth** – This protrusion of just the front teeth, may be unavoidable when the condition is hereditary, but can also be caused by prolonged pacifier usage.



## Can Pacifier Teeth be Treated?

If pacifier/thumb sucking habits are broken early enough, baby teeth that have become misaligned can naturally correct themselves, drifting back to their natural positions. If, however, the teeth have been misaligned for some time after extended pacifier/thumb sucking, it is not likely that the teeth will correct themselves and may instead require braces or other orthodontic treatment in order to correct the tooth alignment.

Speak to your child's dentist if you need advice to break a pacifier/sucking habit or if you have any concerns about the alignment of your child's teeth – they'll be able to help you get your child back on track for a healthy smile!

Besides tooth-alignment issues, long-time thumb suckers may also notice:

- Changes to the shape of the roof of their mouths
- Skin irritation of the mouth due to friction from a pacifier or of the thumb/finger
- Speech issues or eating problems (due to malocclusion)
- Possible psychological or social issues down the road, if the child's appearance is affected.

### **How can pacifier teeth be prevented?**

Weaning the child off of the pacifier or helping them break a thumb sucking habit early can greatly reduce the risk of tooth alignment issues down the road.

Parents/caretakers may gradually wean the child by:

- Using positive reinforcement
- Rewards
- Trades
- Rocking or music (if used primarily for self-soothing)

All of this is certainly more easily said than done, but is ultimately necessary to prevent dental issues.



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