

THUMB SUCKING: HOW TO KICK THE HABIT

Thumb sucking is as common in infancy as diaper rash. And usually it's no more than just a passing phase. In fact, the majority of children who suck their thumbs stop on their own by about four years of age.

Studies show that trying to break the habit in a child younger than four may do more harm than good because persistent negative responses such as criticizing and nagging can damage his self-esteem. But what about the older child who refuses to stop sucking his thumb?

"If the habit hasn't self-corrected by the age of four years, it's analogous to a cigarette addiction," says Dr. Patrick Friman, a pediatric psychologist at the University of Nebraska Medical Center in Omaha. "At that age or older, a lot of kids would like to quit, but they can't."

How to break the habit? Since chronic thumb sucking can lead to dental problems such as overbite, Friman, the American Academy of Pediatrics, and other childcare experts recommend using any commercially available bitter-tasting liquid that's made to be painted onto the thumb, such as Purepac's Stopzit, which is



available at major drugstores.

But there's a trick to making this treatment effective. "Several parents have tried these products and they'll tell you that they don't work," says Friman, "but vigilance is what makes the difference."

Friman recommends applying the liquid to the offending thumb or finger once in the

morning, once in the evening, and every time you observe thumb sucking. Make sure the product is about as thick as fingernail polish, so it will stick.

While some pediatricians frown on the use of such products, viewing them as a form of punishment, Friman's approach counterbalances that problem with a liberal use of rewards. He tells parents to put 50 to 100 small prizes, such as coins, baseball cards, and small toys, into a grab bag. Each day that the child has kept his thumb out of his mouth, allow him to pick something from the bag.

After one week of no thumb sucking, institute a fade-out treatment period. Begin by stopping the morning applications of bitter liquid; after a second week

of no thumb sucking, stop the evening applications. But always use the liquid during any relapse episodes. If the child starts sucking on another finger (substitutes a pinky, say, for a thumb), Friman says parents should start the process of applying the bitter liquid all over again.

—Aubin Tyler

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