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THUMB/FINGER SUCKING, PACIFIERS, AND SECURITY OBJECTS

Many children develop a security ritual that may include thumb or finger sucking and/or a security object like a blanket, pacifier or toy. This is very normal, and is actually considered to be a sign of emotional health. Security objects help the child calm him/herself in order to fall asleep, relieve tension and stress, handle separation, and deal with new situations. Most children give up these habits on their own by age 5. You can begin to limit blankets, pacifiers and toys by saying "only in your bed, on the couch, in the car," etc., to avoid a child dragging the security object everywhere. This still gives the child access to the object when he/she really needs it but makes using it a little more boring and undesirable.

There is really no reason to take away a security object. Usually by elementary school age, the security object is used in private. Many times the blanket or toy finds its way under the bed or into the closet, although it may reappear during stressful times. It is not unusual for young adults to take an old security object with them to college! Even adults, if they thought about it, would realize that they, too, have security objects: a certain pillow, a sleep position, a comfort food.

In the case of thumb or finger sucking, parents worry about teeth and mouth alignment. If you think this is a problem for your child, consult your dentist. Usually, intervention will not happen until after age 5. There are appliances that can be put into the mouth to discourage these habits. You can also try a gradual behavior modification-type program which may involve stickers and rewards, or use of a timer at night (first week, try to not suck your thumb for two minutes, until the timer goes off; increase by several minutes each week until the child eventually falls asleep without sucking). Always explain what you're doing and why first, and enlist the child's help. If this method causes increased tension or anxiety in your child, discontinue and try again in a few months. Too much pressure can actually make the habit worse.

For pacifiers, if they are affecting teeth or mouth development, you can take them away, but always substitute another security object, and don't be surprised if they start thumb/finger sucking. Then follow the suggestions above.

Always avoid negative methods to end sucking — slapping hands, yelling, nagging, teasing "only babies suck their thumbs," punishing, sarcasm, threatening "your teeth will fall out if you do that," etc. Placing bad-tasting substances like Tabasco sauce on your child's thumb or fingers is NEVER recommended.

For more information, contact the Family Life Educators at 605-322-3660 or familylifeeducators@avera.org.

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