



THUMB SUCKING: WHEN TO BE CONCERNED

BY DR ELIYAHU SIMCHA GHERMAN, DDS

Oh, The Thumb Suckers Thumb....

Is all wrinkled and wet and withered as white as the snow,
But the taste of the thumb is the sweetest taste yet
As only we thumb suckers know (*Shel Silverstein*).....

Ok... you can admit it, at some point in your life, you also probably sucked your thumb... but you stopped. **Almost all normal children** engage in what is called non-nutritive sucking or thumb-sucking, however prolonged sucking can lead to a malocclusion or a bad bite.

Generally, thumb sucking early on, when there are only baby teeth present, have little, if not any, long term effects. If the thumb sucking persists beyond that time, and the adult teeth start to come in, then the child can develop what is called an open bite.

The open bite that develops from a thumb habit will usually have top teeth that are spaced and stick out, while the lower teeth are pushed in. Often, the top jaw will narrow, the lower jaw can grow downward and the adult teeth are blocked by the thumb from coming into the mouth normally.

WHY DOES THIS HAPPEN?

When a force is placed on teeth, they will move. That's how braces work! Now I know the readers of Connections Magazine are very educated, and you are asking yourself the following:

So why don't our teeth move even without braces, there are so many daily forces in the mouth?

We all know the famous teaching about how Hashem created the mouth with many gates to sensitize us to the importance of using our mouth for the right things, the lips, tongue, teeth and

muscles, it's basically a 'mini Fort Knox'. Because there is so much going on in there, Hashem put them all in a balance. The cheeks and lips push one way and the tongue pushes the other way while the two jaws keep each other balanced. When the thumb invades, it pushes the tongue down, allowing the cheeks to push the top teeth in and make the top jaw smaller. At the same time, the thumb prevents the front teeth from coming in, while the back teeth erupt more, thus causing the jaws to grow away from each other.

NOW BEFORE YOU PANIC.....

The American Association Of Orthodontists recommends children first see an orthodontist at age 7, which means before age 7, parents for the most part, can just chill and let their little thumb suckers be. If it does bother you or you want to get a head start in discouraging the habit, here are a few techniques.

- **Don't mention it.** Sometimes not giving attention to their habit is enough to stop it.
- **Use positive reinforcement.** No thumb = trip to the toy store. Never use negative reinforcement at an early age, such as hot sauce chrain or s'chug on the finger. Please don't threaten to chop it off! These methods can often backfire.
- **Identify why.** Maybe a stress is causing the habit. Identify the real issue and provide comfort in other ways- such as a hug or reassuring words.

After age 7, bring your child to the orthodontist who will, at the first meeting, will generally just shmooze it over with your child and explain why it is important to stop sucking their thumb. For many kids' a shmooze with the orthodontist is more effective than a talk with Mom and Dad.

If this doesn't work, a special orthodontic appliance called a habit-breaker or thumb-guard may be recommended. This will prevent your child from placing their thumb against the roof of their mouth and works in almost all cases.

Finally, a funny story that my professor once told me. He had a patient that had all the signs of thumb sucking, he was sure that he did, but the child kept denying it.

At the next visit the parents told my professor he was in fact wrong, their child did not suck his thumb....he sucked his big toe! No poem for that kid!

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