



Helping Hands

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DIGIT SUCKING

Many children suck their thumbs or fingers for short periods during their infancy and early childhood. This habit may even be considered normal during the first two years of life, although many children never have a digit-sucking habit. Research has indicated that if these habits are stopped early, the effects on the teeth and their positioning will oftentimes self correct. However, in the same study, of the children who continued the habit beyond the age of six years old (the age when permanent teeth begin to erupt) *none* had a normal bite at the age of 12.¹ The following are suggestions to ensure that your child develops a healthy and functional smile:

- ❖ Monitor your child's habit. If it is gradually diminishing, the child will most likely stop the habit by themselves.
- ❖ If you, or the dentist, begins to notice any adverse dental or skeletal changes (the way the teeth bite together), corrective measures may need to be taken.
- ❖ If the habit persists beyond the eruption of the permanent teeth, severe skeletal malformations may occur.
- ❖ In some instances, the child's bite may cause speech and swallowing problems.
- ❖ The best time to initiate treatment is around the age of 4 to 5 years old. Remember, the habit often takes months to fully correct and should be accomplished before the permanent teeth begin to erupt.
- ❖ The parent's role in the correction of an oral habit is important. Try to create a positive environment and use reinforcement to help your child. Punishment or "nagging" will only increase your child's anxiety and may cause the habit to worsen.

Your child's bite and habit will be monitored at their re-care examinations. Your dentist will help you decide the appropriate time to start corrective measures, if necessary. There are numerous methods for helping the child stop the habit. Your dentist will discuss the most appropriate method for your child with you.

If you and your child are having a difficult time curbing the habit on your own, your dentist can assist you in finding a qualified professional who is trained and certified to provide therapy to help conquer the habit quickly and effectively.

¹ Popovich and Thompson, Appliance Therapy. 1966 Aug;8(8):689-91.