

## Tutorial

# Avoiding failure when treating digit-sucking habits through careful patient selection

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## Avoiding Failure when Treating Digit-Sucking Habits through Careful Patient Selection

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I have treated over a thousand children with digit-sucking habits in the past 20 years. Through the years, I have made many mistakes. These mistakes have been valuable learning tools. This summary is to acquaint the therapist with appropriate patient selection with relation to age to insure maximum success in enabling children to overcome their sucking habits.

I do not treat children before they have reached the age of 5 for much the same reasons we do not send children to kindergarten until they are 5 years of age. Research has shown that just as there are predictable stages of physical growth, children also develop intellectually and emotionally in fairly predictable, patterned stages that are remarkably similar from child to child. A prerequisite to entering kindergarten is the development of adequate cognitive, emotional and communication skills a child will need to succeed with the task encountered in kindergarten. To succeed with the task of overcoming a digit-sucking habit, a child must first be motivated to want to stop the sucking behavior. This motivation will then facilitate the necessary willingness, on the part of the child to accept responsibility for discontinuing the sucking habit. To accomplish these goals, the child must be at least 5 years of age in terms of intellectual and emotional development in order to communicate and motivate effectively.

Preschoolers have a very finite understanding of abstract concepts, logical reasoning and cause-and-effect relationships. These children have limited capacity to assume or grasp another person's point of view. Their own perspective, which is quite different than an adult's, is all they can manage. Comments about crooked teeth problems have little impact on this age group. They know they can chew their hamburgers and pizza and that's all they are concerned about with respect to their teeth.

Promising a surprise for one or two weeks without sucking may motivate the preschooler to participate in the program. However, the concept of time in terms of past and future is difficult for the preschooler to comprehend. When you promise a surprise next week, you may as well be talking about 100 years from now in terms of a young child's understanding. A preschooler forgets the reason for stopping a digit sucking habit from one minute to the next, but remembers about the surprise. Young children are oriented toward self-gratification and the need for this gratification is immediate.

The thought processes of preschoolers are dominated by sensory impressions. They only understand the plea-

sure they derive from their sucking activity and have limited capability to appreciate adults' desire for them to quit.

Overcoming the dependence on the sucking behavior at bedtime is difficult under the best of circumstances. This difficulty is compounded because nightmares are a common and normal part of development with this age group. Their vivid imaginations conjure up all kinds of monsters in the night. The vivid imagination of preschoolers can also contribute to the telling of some "tall tales." They often hide under their bed, a blanket or in any inconspicuous spot and sneak a little suck. They will often deny the transgression. In the minds of preschoolers, they are not deliberately lying because they do not have the same perception of being dishonest that an adult or older child would. They simply do not want to miss out on the promised surprise and their "fantasy oriented" stage of development makes it difficult for them to sort out what they wished had happened from what really did. The parents, however, may take a very dim view of this "slanting of the truth" and may react by punishing the child.

In my experience, preschoolers can be cajoled into trying not to suck a thumb/finger by the promise of a surprise. However, all too often after the prize is given they tend to relapse back to the sucking behavior. It's not hard to understand if you realize these idiosyncrasies are typical of preschoolers cognitive and emotional development. If the therapist continues to push a child beyond his/her limits or capabilities, the result will be "burn out" and frustration to the point that the child will resist any part of the program to eliminate the sucking habit now and in the future.

Certainly, every child is a unique individual and some preschoolers will get through the program just fine with no relapse. However, it is our responsibility to give all children that come under our care every possible consideration to enable them to succeed.

Children's thought processes and perception of the world around them are quite different depending on their state of emotional, cognitive and intellectual development. This development occurs in stages and is age related. It is extremely important not to ascribe adult expectations or depth of comprehension to a child who is unable developmentally to understand. Setting goals or tasks that a child cannot accomplish, understand or achieve can lead to a lasting sense of self-doubt and shame. And that...is too great a risk to take.