

Literary Review

A review of: Helping the Thumb-Sucking Child, by Rosemarie A. Van Norman (1999)

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Book Review

Helping the Thumb-Sucking Child

By: Rosemarie A. Van Norman

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All inquiries regarding information on reviews and abstracts should be directed to the respective authors. For ordering books, contact your local bookstore or write directly to the publishers. Articles or books for review in this department should be addressed to Dr Alex Jacobson, University of Alabama School of Dentistry, University Station/Birmingham AL 35295

A habit pattern that frustrates parents of children probably more than any other is that of thumb sucking or digit sucking. Among the parents' concerns are the negative remarks by peers, siblings, or relatives, and its effect on speech and chewing ability. The book begins by providing an understanding of the habit of thumb sucking, starting with sucking as an instinct and progressing toward the reasons for transferring the habit to the thumb and why parents so often fail in their ability to curb the habit. Following this is a section that shows how a prolonged thumb-sucking habit may likely affect the social interaction of the child by virtue of the fact that parents, siblings, relatives, peers, teachers and at times total strangers make them feel ashamed of their thumb-sucking behavior. The result often is a child with low self-esteem, who are withdrawn, anxious, and possibly angry and aggressive.

The speech and dental effects of the habit, outlined in a separate chapter, are familiar to orthodontists. Secondary associated habits include hair twirling, genital fondling, ear caressing or rubbing, and enuresis. Thumb sucking under the age of 5 years should not be a cause for concern according to the author. Preventing the habit in the first instance is recommended, this means attending to the baby's needs, seeing to it that the child is pampered, well fed, played with, and cared for. Such children are less likely to establish a prolonged sucking habit as they grow older.

To successfully eliminate the habit, the timing must be right and the family willing to participate, usually when the child is 5 years of age or older. Family stress situations such as separation or divorce, arrival of a new sibling, moving to a new home or school, or changes in routines are not good times for intervention.

The final 3 chapters are devoted to practical measures and suggestions for adoption by parents to assist in the elimination of the habit. Parent effectiveness training, consistency, correct timing, sibling assistance, and other "how to" procedures are among the topics discussed. Stressed is positive behavior modification, which is a motivational program designed to eliminate undesirable behavior through positive and negative reinforcement. The program outlined is nonaccusatory, the intention being to unite children and parents who are trying to achieve a common goal. The elimination of nocturnal sucking entails establishing bedtime rituals such as making bedtime comfortable and the use of a nighttime reminder. The book represents a culmination of 3 to 5 years of shared experiences and interaction by the author with parents and children and with professionals in the area of medicine, dentistry and speech. To this reviewer's knowledge this is the most informative book of its kind and I would highly recommend to parents of children who indulge in the habit and to those professionals wishing to learn more about the subject.

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Avery Publishing Group, 120 Old Broadway,
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