Redwood Pediatric Dentistry
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Thumbsucking & Finger Sucking: When & How to Stop

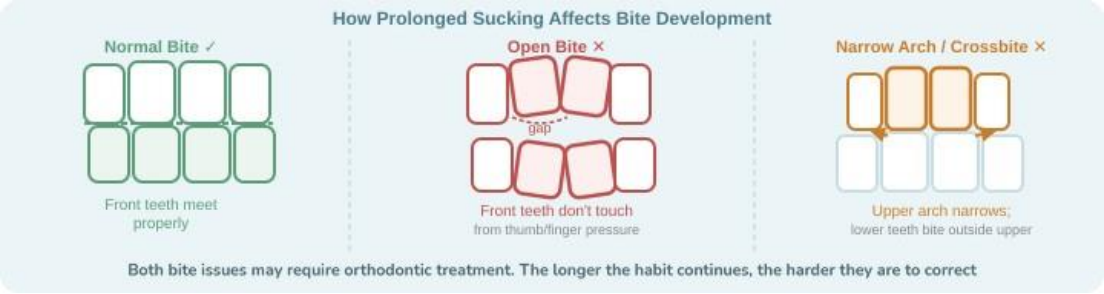
Thumbsucking is a natural comfort habit. The sooner your child stops, the better their chances of avoiding bite and jaw issues that are harder to fix later

1 When Should My Child Stop?



The **American Academy of Pediatric Dentistry (AAPD)** recommends stopping all nonnutritive sucking habits (thumbs, fingers, and pacifiers) by **36 months at the latest**. From both a dental and health standpoint, quitting earlier is always better.

2 Why It Matters for Teeth & Jaws



- **Jaw growth:** Sucking pressure affects how the jaws grow and the upper arch develops.
- **Open bite:** The front teeth are pushed outward and can't meet. The thumb literally holds them apart.
- **Crossbite / narrow arch:** Continued sucking narrows the upper arch so the lower teeth bite outside the upper teeth.
- **Orthodontic treatment:** Many bite problems from sucking can't be fully corrected until the adult teeth come in around age 7, and may require expanders or other appliances.
- **Tongue posture:** Habitual sucking can interfere with proper resting tongue posture and speech development.
- **Illness risk:** Fingers carry germs, so frequent hand-to-mouth contact increases exposure.

3 How to Help Your Child Quit

Every child is different. What works for one may not work for another. Be patient and encouraging. Most kids need **4 to 6 weeks** to fully break the habit. Stressful events or seeing a younger sibling suck their thumb may cause relapses, and that's normal.

- **Talk about it:** Explain why thumbsucking isn't great for their teeth in simple, positive terms. Kids who are motivated to stop (especially those who already don't suck at school) are more successful.

- **Offer distractions:** If they suck when bored, try coloring or play. If they need comfort, try reading a book together or deep breathing exercises.
- **Reward charts:** Sticker systems work well. Celebrate every small win and track progress visually.

Tools to Help Break the Habit

Option	How It Works	Good to Know
T-Guard	Covers thumb/finger, so the child can't get satisfaction from sucking	$60; 90% effective, some kids escape it = may need 2!
Bitter Nail Polish (Mavala)	Unpleasant taste acts as a reminder when thumb goes to mouth	Inexpensive; works best if child wants to stop. Not when eating with hands!
Reward / Sticker Chart	Track daily progress; celebrate small wins	Great first step; works well for motivated kids
Nipit (elbow restrictor)	Restricts elbow from bending to reach mouth	Most parents find it too restrictive

Frequency, Duration, Force: If you can limit sucking to 10 to 15 minutes a day, or if the thumb comes out at night, that is already very helpful. Sleep is also very important.

We're here to help!

Quitting habits is a process, and it's completely OK to need support. Email us or schedule a consult if you'd like more guidance tailored to your child.

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References

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4. Larsson E. Sucking, chewing, and feeding habits and the development of crossbite. Angle Orthod. 2001;71(2):116-119.

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