



A persistent thumb addiction can really suck.

Bad-Habit Rehab

Is your child's thumb sucking, nose picking, or nail biting making you crazy? We'll tell you when to worry and what to do.

BY SHARLENE K. JOHNSON

As a parent, you learn to deal with bodily fluids early on. But nothing really prepares you for the day when your sweetie becomes fixated on boogers. As in "Look at this giant booger, Mommy!" It seems like every time you turn around, her finger is firmly planted in her right nostril. And that's nothing compared with when you see her pull out a crusty golden nugget and pop it into her mouth. At the grocery store. In front of half the neighborhood.

You may have tried repeatedly to get your child to keep her finger out of her nose, but no amount of talking or yelling or bribing seems to make a bit of difference. The problem may be that you're the only one who thinks there's a problem. (Well, you and every other adult in the cereal aisle.)

To a child, it's hard to see why grown-ups get so worked up about things like nose picking or thumb sucking. Little kids don't really care about

appearances, much less the possibility of nosebleeds or dental problems. “Habits like these are generally subconscious behaviors,” says Paul Horowitz, M.D., a pediatrician in Valencia, California. Even when kids do get to the point where they want to give them up, they often don’t know how. Before you call a shrink, get the scoop on your child’s habit and find out what—if anything—you should do about it.

Thumb Sucking

Darlene Weber-Dewitt was pleased when her baby, Sarah, discovered her thumb around 4 months—no more lost Binkies! But as the years passed and Sarah continued sucking, the Fort Collins, Colorado, mother realized the price of that convenient swap: Pacifiers can be tossed into the trash, but thumbs are forever.

HOW BAD IS IT? It’s totally normal for babies to like sucking their thumb or a pacifier, and they usually gradually lose interest. Most kids give up pacifiers before they cause a problem—in one study at The University of Iowa College of Dentistry, only 6 to 10 percent of children still used Binkies at age 4—but thumb sucking is harder to stop. When a sucking habit persists, kids often get teased by their classmates, which may seem like good motivation to quit, but it’s tough for those who can’t stop easily. “Beyond age 5 or 6, children often become secretive and ashamed about it,” says psychologist Dawn Huebner,

Ph.D., author of *What to Do When Bad Habits Take Hold*.

Long-term thumb sucking can interfere with the development of a child’s permanent teeth. “It can change the shape and size of the palate, so she may need a retainer or braces that she may

not have otherwise,” says Rhea Haugseth, D.M.D., a spokesperson for the American Academy of Pediatric Dentistry.

Thumb suckers often develop “buck teeth” that stick out, teeth that don’t close properly (an open bite), or possibly a tongue thrust, which might result in a lisp.

HOW TO DEAL Forget yelling, punishing, or painting her thumb with foul-tasting liquid. “Rather than focusing on what *not* to do, help her learn what she *can* do instead,” says Dr. Huebner. Maybe she can suck on a washcloth or count her teeth by touching each with her tongue. Having a chat with her dentist

got Sarah to quit just before she turned 5. “He told her how pretty her teeth were and that she needed to stop sucking her thumb to keep them nice,” says Weber-Dewitt.

Nose Picking

Disgusting? No question. But nose picking can be oddly gratifying too. Not only does it satisfy a physical urge, it’s a sure way to get attention. Just ask Brandi Brownell, of Birmingham, Alabama, whose 5-year-old daughter, Reese, picked up the habit three years ago when it swept through her preschool

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PLAN OF ATTACK Before you launch an intervention, keep in mind that a budding habit might die on the vine if you simply ignore it. For those that persist, try this program by Dr. Dawn Huebner.

Block it.

Brainstorm ways to make her habit less accessible. Light gloves may deter a thumb sucker at night, while a French braid can prevent twirling.

Fiddle with something.

For whatever motion he craves—chewing, twirling, sucking—suggest other ways he can get that same sensory satisfaction. Give your child Silly Putty to play with, a worry stone to rub, a straw to chew, or yarn to twirl.

Be proactive.

Teach her a more positive way to attend to what’s bothering her. A nail biter might rub lotion on her cuticles or file her nails, for example.

Find new outlets.

Your child may need other ways to drain tension like drawing or deep breathing. “For kids who are often stressed or have difficulty managing strong feelings, it’s important for them to see a therapist,” says Dr. Huebner.

class like a virus. “I decided not to say anything at first because I didn’t want to encourage it, but then I just couldn’t handle it anymore,” says Brownell.

“Thankfully, Reese gradually stopped on her own.” Before you crack down too hard on your little nose miner, consider this: A whopping 91 percent of adults admitted that they still pick their nose, according to a survey conducted by the Dean Foundation for health, research, and education, in Middleton, Wisconsin.

HOW BAD IS IT? Nose picking (and even booger eating) is relatively harmless. Beyond the age of 3 or 4, though, kids who go digging for gold in public can be teased or ostracized by friends. Intense picking can lead to nosebleeds, sores, or, rarely, a hole in the septum, which separates the nostrils.

HOW TO DEAL Teach your child to use a tissue, and help him find something else to pick at when the urge strikes, such as an old fuzzy blanket. It may also help to use a humidifier in his

bedroom and put a dab of petroleum jelly just inside his nose. The moisture should make it less itchy and reduce his urge to pick. Also file or clip his nails down short, because long nails can do more damage, suggests Dr. Horowitz.

Hair Twirling

If your child constantly twirls or strokes her hair, it doesn’t necessarily mean she’s stressed or anxious. Often, the repetitive motion feels soothing when she’s bored or sleepy. It may become a habit because she likes it or because she has created a snarl or an irritated spot that she then feels drawn to explore.

HOW BAD IS IT? Hair twirling is pretty benign, although kids can create nasty tangles that have to be cut out. In rare cases, it can progress to hair pulling (trichotillomania), a disorder that involves twisting or plucking hair from the scalp, eyelashes, eyebrows, or other body parts. While a preschooler may outgrow a mild hair-pulling habit, older

kids with a stronger fixation usually need professional counseling and sometimes even medication to stop.

HOW TO DEAL You might try distracting your child or styling her hair so that it’s difficult to twirl, but don’t make an issue of it. Hair twirling often stops on its own, but if it begins to cause real problems, like snarls or irritated skin, check out “Plan of Attack,” on page 52.

Teeth Grinding

Sneak into your child’s bedroom tonight and listen. Hear any squeaky grinding? That’s the sound of future paychecks being eaten up by dental bills. Most kids usually only grind their teeth when they’re sleeping, and parents don’t always know about it—but dentists do. A persistent grinder can wear down the surface of his teeth. “About half of my very young patients have signs of grinding,” says Dr. Haugseth. Babies with new teeth may grind them simply because their mouth feels different.

Older kids may grind unconsciously because of an abnormality in their bite, and restless sleepers often do it too. Some research has found that teeth grinders have higher levels of anxiety or stress, but in many cases there's no obvious reason for the habit.

HOW BAD IS IT? "Children can actually grind the enamel completely off their teeth," says Dr. Haugseth. "The layer under the enamel is very sensitive and also much more porous, so those teeth become more susceptible to decay." Your child may also start to feel more sensitivity to cold liquids.

HOW TO DEAL If your child is also a restless sleeper, consider seeing a sleep specialist. If he seems unusually anxious, counseling might be in order. (Fortunately, research shows that childhood habits are not a sign of significant emotional problems.) Otherwise, give it time. While some dentists may recommend a mouth guard for a child as young as 4 to

silence grinding, Dr. Haugseth prefers to wait until the permanent teeth start coming in around age 6 or 7. By then, most kids stop grinding on their own. But if your child's permanent teeth start to show signs of wear, your dentist may want to fit him for a mouth guard to put on at night and may suggest that he see an orthodontist to rule out bite issues. His future spouse will owe you one.

Nail Biting

Tracey Segarra, of Garden City, New York, knows precisely what inspired Jessica, one of her 8-year-old twins, to start biting her nails last year: "She was watching an episode of *The Fairly OddParents* on TV, and one of the characters started biting his nails in a tense situation," Segarra explains. "Jessica tried it, and within a day or two she was hooked." Usually, kids start biting inadvertently, often nibbling for the first time when they're bored or feel a hangnail, says Dr. Huebner. Then

they keep going back to it because they like the sensation or to soothe the sensitive spot they created.

HOW BAD IS IT? Serious biters can nibble their nails or cuticles to the point of creating painfully raw skin or sores that bleed or become infected.

HOW TO DEAL For a 3- to 4-year-old, distraction is the best intervention. When you see your child's fingers near his mouth, give him carrots to munch or a puzzle to work on. For kids ages 5 and up who have a true habit, Dr. Huebner recommends a multifaceted approach (see "Plan of Attack, page 52). "Young kids who are significant biters usually won't stop on their own," she says.

Truth is, giving up any habit is hard work. Remember the last time you resolved to forgo that extra cup of joe? It's not any easier for your child to stop biting his nails, sucking his thumb, or twirling his hair, says Dr. Huebner. Once you recognize this you'll be more supportive, rather than frustrated. □