

HABITS: GOOD AND BAD

In Touchpoints, Dr. Brazelton discusses habits.

"As they grow, children explore a wide variety of behaviors. A number of repetitive actions, such as head banging, sucking and rocking are tried out as ways to ease tension or as self-comforting behavior. If these are not fixed as patterns, the child will abandon them and try out other behavior. In this way, a child explores a whole range of habit patterns. Fixation is likely to occur only when too much is made of the particular pattern of behavior."

~ Dr. T. Berry Brazelton,
Touchpoints



Photo by Howard G. Buffett

Some of the self-comforting measures, such as sucking a thumb or pacifier are ways in which your child deals with stress in her world. They should not necessarily be seen as problems. Other habits, which can begin as normal exploration but can become problems if parents overreact or the child is under too much stress, may include biting, hitting, whining, bad words, masturbation and nail biting.

BITING

Biting is a typical way in which your child explores his world. In the first year, he learns to use his mouth to explore his environment and express himself. It is normal for him to test out this behavior in a social situation especially if he does not yet have the words to use for his feelings.

Toddlers rarely bite to be intentionally nasty. They bite in situations in which they are emotionally overwhelmed usually with frustration. Sometimes they even bite when they are overexcited by good feelings such as in rough and tumble play.

Here are several helpful things that you can do when your child bites:

Relax! It seems like a big deal at the moment, but remember most children bite at one time or another. Your child is not a monster and you are not a bad parent. Deal with

the problem immediately – use a simple sentence, such as "No Biting!" or "Biting hurts, and we don't hurt other people." In addition to the sentence, separate the child from the biting situation. Giving too much attention to the situation may reinforce the behavior and cause your child to repeat it.

HITTING

This behavior is similar to biting. Almost all children hit at one time or another. They will use this behavior as a way to communicate their anger or frustration if they do not yet have the words for their feelings. Again, giving too much attention to the situation may reinforce the behavior and cause your child to repeat it.

BAD WORDS

Young children learn early that words are powerful and bad words can get them a lot of attention.

Dr. Lawrence Kutner (Parents Magazine) offers several suggestions to limit your child's use of bad words:

Listen closely to the words YOU use! Restrict what your child sees on television. Practice selective ignoring. A child will often repeat a particular word or phrase precisely because it upsets or angers the adults around her. Getting a strong reaction gives her a sense of power. This might be motivation to encourage your child to repeat the behavior, making it a habit.

WHINING

When a young child whines it does not mean he is overindulged or spoiled. It is just a normal way he communicates to get attention when he's tired, hungry, wet or soiled, uncomfortable or frustrated. These suggestions may help:

Look for an obvious physical cause that may require your attention. Your child may be hungry or overtired, have an ear infection or cold or need a diaper change.

Limit frustration. Be aware of your child's motor skills and provide age-appropriate toys that he can master. Try to avoid situations that are likely to bring about whining.

Encourage your child to express his feeling in words instead of whining.

Demonstrate appropriate behavior. When both you and your child are in good humor, demonstrate the difference between a whiny voice and a normal voice and see if he can tell which is more pleasant.

Ignore whining. Avoid communications and eye contact after you firmly remind your child that you will not respond until his whining stops.

MASTURBATION

All children explore their bodies. This normal exploration often causes parents to be concerned. Even when parents can tolerate this behavior in the child in private, they worry about whether it will become a habit and appear in public. Dr. Brazelton offers this advice for parents: Don't emphasize the behavior. Don't show disapproval or try to inhibit it. If it is frequent, look for underlying reasons. Is the child very tense? Is he over-stimulated with activity in the household? Has he other ways of self-comforting?

If your child is stimulated by lots of activity, make sure he has time to relax and unwind. Comfort him by holding him quietly. Find out if others around the child are paying too much attention to this habit. Other children or adults in the house may be over-reacting and telling the child that it's taboo. Instead of helping him, this serves to fix masturbation as a pattern.

THUMB SUCKING/PACIFIER

Sucking a thumb or pacifier, nail biting, rocking and

carrying a "blankie" are all private self-comforting behaviors. This is needed by all children at certain times of development.

All healthy newborns begin life with an urge to suck. This need for sucking is not satisfied by feeding alone. At one time or another, all babies occupy their mouth with fist, fingers, pacifier or thumb. The behavior is so soothing that baby's heartbeats and respiration rates actually slow while they're doing it. The comforting derived from sucking may allow babies to return to and maintain a deeper state of sleep.

Toward the end of the first year of life and into the second year of life, your baby's world expands rapidly. He is more aware of himself and of other people, is growing increasingly mobile and is interested in new activities. The behaviors of self-comforting will "take a back seat" to the exciting development of this time. It will be important at this time to resist the temptation to use his self-comforting behaviors as a remedy for all fretfulness.

Thumb sucking often creates the most concern for parents because of the associated dental problems. Most children will stop this behavior before they enter school; however, a few will continue into the school years. Dr. Nowak, pediatric dentist at University of Iowa College of Dentistry and Medicine in Iowa City, concludes that parents need to intervene in this behavior if the child is older than 5 years of age, shows dental wear and tear or is being teased. He offers these suggestions to assist your child in breaking the habit:

Read the book, [David Decides: No More Thumbsucking](#) by Susan Heitler.

Take your child to talk to a dentist.

Put something on your child's thumb, such as a sticker, to increase the child's awareness of the behavior.

Use a code word to gently remind him of the behavior. "Jelly Bean" is a kinder way to remind him in public that he is sucking his thumb than to simply say "Stop sucking your thumb."

If your child associates a blanket or stuffed animal with thumb sucking, gradually take that prop away.

Use a reward system for times of not sucking his thumb.

The experts disagree on the effectiveness of the use of metal appliances or bitter-tasting liquids painted on the thumb.

By the time your child has reached the school years and continues to suck her thumb, it is clear that she is in control of this habit. None of the above strategies will succeed until SHE wants to quit!

GOOD HABITS

Just as parents play a role in the development or disappearance of bad habits, you can also influence the development of good habits. It has been stated that if a behavior is repeated every day for 21 days that behavior will become a habit. The truth in that statement is that to influence your child in healthy habits you **MUST** be consistent in the encouragement of the good behavior. Developing good habits is a small piece of the bigger picture of teaching your child responsibility.

It will be important to understand the difference between **responsibility** (the acceptance of an obligation) and **obedience** (doing what one is told).

Everyone wants their children to be healthy and responsible for themselves. As you encourage good habits, involve your child in setting goals for new responsible behavior. He needs to understand the value of the new "habit." Brushing his teeth everyday will keep his teeth healthy and clean. There is less chance of him developing a cavity! Good habits may include: daily baths, brushing teeth, hanging up clothes, picking up toys and making the bed.

Becoming responsible does not happen overnight. It develops over time. Parents play an important role in teaching their children to be responsible.

The first step is for the child to help with a task. This can begin at a very young age. Toddlers who are able to take a toy off of a shelf can put it back on a shelf.

The second step is to do the task when reminded.

The third step is to take full responsibility to do the task without supervision or reminding. This step usually occurs after the preschool years. There are often several years of teaching between steps one and three.