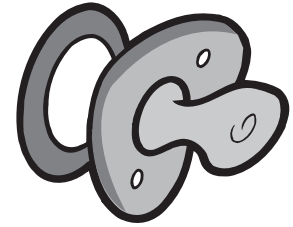


Getting Your Child Off a Pacifier

by Jennifer Vroom, M.S., CCC-SLP



Can using a pacifier for too long hinder my child's development?

There are many factors to consider when determining whether or not a pacifier is right for your child. There is still much debate over the potentially positive versus negative consequences of using a pacifier. Here are some of the pros and cons:

Pros: Pacifiers may be used...

- **As a sleep aid.**
- **To comfort your child in stressful situations:** For instance, a pacifier can serve as a helpful distraction during a doctor's visit.
- **To distinguish between a hungry vs. a fussy baby:** If a fussy baby turns away the pacifier, he/she may be ready for another meal. However, keep in mind that a fussy baby may be trying to communicate a need to burp, be held, or be changed.
- **To help with reflux:** Though pacifiers are not recommended as a treatment for acid reflux, the sucking action may actually help keep stomach fluid from rising upwards in the throat.
- **For infants who are tube-fed:** Using a pacifier during tube-feedings may increase an infant's association between oral movements and food intake, which is beneficial when they transition to eating via mouth.

Cons: Pacifiers may result in...

- **Breast-feeding difficulties:** For some babies, learning to switch between the breast, bottle, and/or pacifier may be difficult. Frequent use of a pacifier may even reduce a mother's production of milk.
- **Dental Problems:** Long term use or using the pacifier after the eruption of permanent teeth, usually past the age of 4-5 years, may result in future dental issues such as the misalignment of teeth.
- **Increased risk of middle ear infections.**
- **Speech Problems:** Since using a pacifier involves an immature suck-swallow pattern, some children who use these over a long period of time may experience a delay in developing more mature tongue movements, resulting in sound errors.
- **Swallowing Difficulties:** Prolonged pacifier use may lead to delayed swallow development.
- **Dependency:** Some children come to rely on their pacifier for comfort.
- **Negative Social Impacts:** The older a child gets, the more difficult it may be to socialize with peers, if he/she is still using a pacifier.

When is a child too old for a pacifier?

Even before babies are born, they display a natural tendency to suck on thumbs/fingers. It is a way to explore their environment and to provide comfort. Between 2-4 months of age, infants tend to have the most need for extra or non-nutritive sucking (i.e., not during feeding). Many children let go of the pacifier before 3 years of age. However, others continue to use them until age four or five. If your child has not yet given up his/her pacifier by three years, it's a good idea to go ahead and encourage decreased dependency on it. Some things you can do to reduce use of the pacifier include:

- **Keeping the pacifier out of sight.** As the saying goes, "out of sight out of mind."
- **Being consistent.** It may be challenging at first, but don't give up. If you give in on one occasion, the child learns that he/she will get what he/she wants just by pushing hard enough.
- **Designating certain times of the day for the pacifier.** For example, you may allow the pacifier at naps or at bedtime.
- **Slowly reducing the amount of time allowed for pacifier use.** Your child doesn't have to go cold turkey. Rather, many children will respond more positively to a gradual change.
- **Encourage good dental care.** Put more emphasis on teaching mature oral activities such as brushing/flossing and why they're important.
- **Find other ways the child can comfort himself/herself versus resorting to the pacifier.** A favorite toy can work as a good substitute.
- **Decrease use at developmental stages.** For example, when a child is learning to crawl, you may want to begin limiting his/her access to the pacifier. You could continue to decrease availability as the child begins to talk.

Other Points to Remember:

- **A pacifier should NOT be a substitute for nurturing.** A fussy baby may also be calmed through cuddling, massage, reading, playing, rocking, or with music. So, when an infant cries, these other methods should be attempted first to increase the bond between parent/caregiver and child .
- **Children learn from each other.** Children may be more motivated to stop pacifier use if other kids in his/her environment are not using them.
- **Purchase a pacifier that's dishwasher safe.** Pacifiers need to be washed often for good oral hygiene.
- **Avoid too many changes at one time.** Assess what's going on in the child's life (e.g., moving to new place, adjusting to new baby) and whether it would be appropriate to expect him/her to decrease pacifier use at that particular time.
- **Be patient.** You're probably not going to see an overnight change, so allow your child the time he/she needs.
- **Give praise often!** In order to keep your child's attention away from the pacifier, praise him/her while engaged in other activities.
- **You can always consult your child's pediatrician, dentist, and/or speech pathologist with any questions/concerns.**

Resources:

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