

# the Doctor's Office

## Perils of the Pacifier

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by Bruce A. Epstein, M. D. - 1/10/94

It is a common practice in most newborn nurseries to supply all infants with a pacifier. Made of plastic and rubber, in different shapes, sizes and colors, everywhere you look babies and young children are seen sucking on their pacifier. Why are pacifiers so popular today when their use raises important medical questions and psychological concerns? Are these plastic suckers hanging from our children's mouths really that necessary?

Babies are born with a number of reflexes. One is the most important is the sucking reflex that enables the infant to get the necessary calories survival. Yet, recent studies have demonstrated that pacifier use is responsible for a decrease in mothers breast feeding their newborns. A team of physicians in Brazil reported that pacifier use interfered with successful breast feeding by reducing the intensity of nipple stimulation, which in turn significantly decreased milk production. So parents who want to breast feed should think twice before popping a pacifier in their newborn's mouth. Even babies who are formula fed will become frustrated when a pacifier is used too often since they receive non-nutritive sucking from the pacifier.

Another reason parents use a pacifier is the hope it will prevent their infant from sucking their thumb. Many adults believe that thumb sucking is a disgusting habit and that children who suck their thumbs instead of a pacifier will develop teeth deformities. Not true, according to pediatric dentists at the Medical College of Georgia who found that children who used "orthodontic pacifiers" had just as many dental abnormalities as those who used ordinary pacifiers or their thumb. Therefore, both prolonged thumb sucking and pacifier uses are equal in producing large orthodontic bills for the parents. The thumb has other advantages: it is attached so it can't get lost and it certainly isn't any dirtier than a pacifier.

There are other reasons for not using pacifiers. First, pacifiers frequently carry many wonderful bacteria, and in the case of yeast infections (thrush), the ailment is difficult to eradicate as long as parents insist on reinserting the pacifier every time it falls out. The use of pacifiers after 12 months has been shown to interfere with normal babbling and speech development (It's hard to talk with a pacifier in your mouth!) Hardly a day goes by when a pacifier is recalled for safety reasons. And here is a word of caution to parents with older children. Often it is a brother or sister who take it on themselves to place the pacifier, sometimes incorrectly, into the newborns mouth to stop crying.

Probably the most important reason not to use a pacifier is the message it sends the child. It teaches an infant that we prefer them to be quiet in public and in private, particularly if they might cry. Yet crying is one of the few

ways babies have to communicate their needs. Crying alerts us to the child's discomfort. Is it an earache, hunger or fear? Crying is a signal that a child may be tired, bored, or needs some attention. Putting a pacifier in the mouth silently tells the child to be quiet, that we are not concerned about what they are feeling, and that we prefer silence from them.

Sure, crying is annoying and interferes with adult pleasures or work, but it also has a meaning that should not be masked by the pacifier.

Should the child need extra sucking, as some do, why not let them use nature's pacifier, their thumb. According to pediatrician Dr. T. Berry Brazelton, "the thumb is always there, and the child can use it whenever they want. The baby who can comfort themselves will become an easier baby to parent." The thumb's value lies in its being controlled by the child, and not a technique learned by the child at the insistence of the parent. The child given a pacifier for fussing or crying never learns how to comfort themselves. "It's a stressful world for small children," Dr. Brazelton writes in his new book *Touchpoints: The Essential Reference*, "and thumb sucking is a healthy sign of competence, a sort of self-comforting way of managing the stresses."

The overuse of pacifiers teaches our children, "Don't call me, I'm busy." "Stop crying, I do not want to hear you when you cry." What we don't think about is that this subtle message may tell our children that we are not there for them. The pacifier, despite its name, should not substitute for vital communication -talking, playing and interacting- between parent and child. Resist the temptation to use the pacifier as a constant tranquilizer, automatically popping the plastic and rubber sucker into the child's mouth as the quickest and easiest remedy for fretfulness or crying. Instead, moms and dads might want to consider other alternatives, like hugging your baby, rocking the infant in a chair, or just talking to your child. A child who cries has a need, and you're not going to spoil them with a little holding or cuddling. And remember, they are only young once and will grow up before you know it.

*As a reminder, this column is being written to draw attention to the issues discussed, and should not be relied upon as medical advice and is not intended to replace the advice of your child's physician.*