



# Mott Poll Report

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## Helpful or a Habit? Parent Views on Pacifiers and Thumb-Sucking

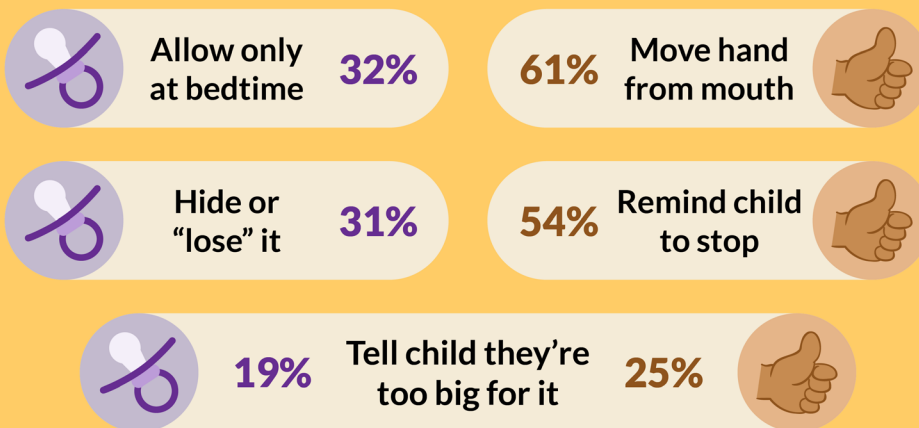
Babies and young children benefit from being able to calm themselves when they are sleepy or stressed. The C.S. Mott Children's Hospital National Poll on Children's Health asked a national sample of parents of children 1-6 years old about their experiences with the use of pacifiers or thumb/finger-sucking as self-soothing techniques.

About half of parents (51%) report their child currently or previously used a pacifier. Parents who say their child uses a pacifier indicate that they use it at bedtime or naptime (79%), when stressed or fussy (47%), when sad (24%), or when watching TV or videos (10%); some say the child uses the pacifier almost all the time (18%). About one-quarter of parents (23%) report their child currently or previously sucked their thumb or fingers. Parents who say their child sucks their thumb or fingers say they do so at bedtime or naptime (57%), when stressed or fussy (47%), when sad (25%), or when watching TV or videos (24%); some say the child sucks their thumb/fingers almost all the time (14%).

Parent strategies to decrease or end their child's pacifier use include allowing it only at bedtime (32%), hiding or "losing" the pacifier (31%), telling the child they are too big for a pacifier (19%), taking it out when child is distracted (17%), or cutting a hole in the nipple (10%); one-third (33%) let the child decide when to stop. Parent strategies to decrease or end their child's thumb/finger-sucking include moving their hand away from their mouth (61%), reminding child to stop (54%), telling the child they are too big for it (25%), giving the child a stuffed animal to hold instead (18%), putting something on their thumb/fingers (hot sauce, Vaseline, mitten) (9%), or giving the child a reward for not doing it (7%).

Parents believe the right age for a child to stop using a pacifier is age 0-2 years (79%), while 15% feel age 3 or older is fine, and 6% don't specify a particular age. Parents believe the right age for a child to stop sucking their thumb or fingers is age 0-2 years (57%), while 31% feel age 3 or older is fine, and 12% don't specify a particular age. Some parents feel they acted too late to stop their child's pacifier use (9%) or thumb/finger-sucking (16%). Among parents who say their child never used a pacifier or sucked their thumb, 39% say they specifically tried to discourage it when their child was a baby, 18% encouraged their baby to use a pacifier and 43% let their child figure it out.

### Parent strategies to reduce or stop pacifier use and thumb-sucking in kids age 1-6



### Report Highlights

Half of parents say their child used a pacifier and one-quarter say their child sucked their thumb or fingers.

4 in 5 parents think pacifier use should stop at or before age 2, but only 3 in 5 parents think thumb-sucking should stop by that age.

1 in 11 parents feel they acted too late to stop their child's pacifier use, compared to 1 in 6 parents for thumb-sucking.

## Data Source & Methods

*This report presents findings from a nationally representative household survey conducted exclusively by Ipsos Public Affairs, LLC (Ipsos) for C.S. Mott Children's Hospital. The survey was administered in February 2025 to a randomly selected, stratified group of adults who were parents of at least one child age 1-18 years living in their household (n=2,021). Adults were selected from Ipsos's web-enabled KnowledgePanel® that closely resembles the U.S. population. The sample was subsequently weighted to reflect population figures from the Census Bureau. The survey completion rate was 67% among panel members contacted to participate. This report is based on responses from 820 parents with at least one child age 1-6. The margin of error for results presented in this report is  $\pm 2$  to 9 percentage points and higher among subgroups.*

*A publication from C.S. Mott Children's Hospital, the University of Michigan Department of Pediatrics, and the Susan B. Meister Child Health Evaluation and Research (CHEAR) Center.*

*Findings from the C.S. Mott Children's Hospital National Poll on Children's Health do not represent the opinions of the University of Michigan. The University of Michigan reserves all rights over this material.*

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## Implications

For newborns, sucking is a natural reflex that they use for breast- or bottle-feeding. Sucking also is a way that many infants calm or soothe themselves as they adjust to the stressors of their environment, such as noise, light, or cold.

Parents of newborns must decide whether to introduce their baby to a pacifier, see if their baby naturally sucks their thumb or fingers, or try to discourage their baby from either a pacifier or thumb-sucking. There are different reasons for and against each option. For example, pacifiers are thought to help babies fall asleep, and research has shown that using a pacifier in the early months of life reduces a baby's risk of sudden infant death syndrome (SIDS). However, some parents may be concerned about pacifier use impacting breastfeeding. To avoid this, parents may wait until breastfeeding has been established before the introduction of the pacifier. Other downsides to introducing a pacifier is that it can cause skin irritation around the baby's mouth, and it's one more thing for parents to keep track of and keep clean. In addition, pacifier use may make babies more susceptible to ear infections. For parents who introduce a pacifier to their newborn, it is important to purchase the right size, to clean it often by boiling it or putting it through the dishwasher, and to check periodically that the nipple isn't damaged or coming loose, which could be a choking hazard.

Naturally, thumb- or finger-sucking (which many babies start before birth) has the advantage of being more convenient than pacifiers. However, the major downside is that it can be difficult to limit how much time children spend sucking them and ultimately try to stop the habit as parents can't simply take them away. Also, dirt and germs are very likely to get into children's mouths as they suck their thumb/fingers, and children who suck their thumb/fingers are at increased risk of ear infections - though not as much as those who use a pacifier.

The benefits of pacifier use or thumb-sucking start to decrease as babies get older, and some experts recommend trying to phase out or decrease the time spent in these habits starting as early as 6 months of age. The most notable problem with long-term use of pacifiers or thumb/finger-sucking is the likelihood of permanently affecting the shape of the child's mouth and leading to misalignment of the teeth; in some cases this may even affect the child's speech. It is important to discontinue thumb-sucking or extensive pacifier use before the child's permanent teeth come in.

Between 2-4 years of age many children stop pacifier use or thumb/finger-sucking on their own, but parents may need to intervene. Parents should recognize that this may be an emotional transition for their child, and approach it with kindness and patience. With pacifiers, parents have a variety of options, depending on the child's age, temperament, and how and when they use the pacifier. Some children can be convinced that they are getting too big for the pacifier, perhaps by reading a book or watching a video about the topic; children may be motivated by stickers or other small rewards. Many parents choose to phase out pacifier use by limiting it to certain situations (e.g., only at bedtime). Other parents choose to make a clean break, perhaps having the "pacifier fairy" take it away, so the child knows it is no longer there. Substituting a stuffed animal or soft doll may provide an alternate self-soothing option for the child. Helping a young child discontinue thumb- or finger-sucking is often more challenging. Parents may need to distract the child and engage them in activities like crafts that keep the child's hand away from their mouth. With older children, parents should discuss with them the reasons for not sucking their thumb/fingers, and for all ages, positive reinforcement may help them achieve the goal of giving up their pacifier or thumb-sucking habit.