



Common Childhood Habits

Children often exhibit behavior and habits that parents find annoying - fingernail biting, thumb-sucking, nose picking and twirling the hair. Children often resort to these repetitive activities during times of tension, idleness, fatigue or boredom. Many of the habits begin during the preschool years and continue as the child grows to school age, or they reappear at various intervals. Children are frequently unaware of the behavior in which they are engaging and are thus not using these habits to defy their parents.

The causes of these habits remain unknown. Their repetitive nature suggests that they serve a soothing or calming process for the brain. Interestingly, even in adulthood many people cling to some of these self-comforting traits during times of stress: sucking on pencil tips or their fingers, pulling their earlobes, fingering their hair.

Types of Habits

Here are some of the most common self-comforting habits of middle childhood that concern parents.

- Thumb-sucking
- Body rocking
- Head banging
- Fingernail biting
- Cuticle picking
- Hair twirling
- Masturbating

Self-comforting habits

Some self-comforting habits, such as thumb-sucking and body rocking, begin in infancy and gradually fade in middle childhood. During these middle years, most thumb-suckers will confine their sucking to the privacy of their home, usually at bedtime, while watching TV or when they are upset. Often, this behavior is accompanied by other vestiges of earlier years, such as cuddling with a blanket.

As children mature and develop greater self-control and self-understanding, their thumb-sucking usually disappears, most often by ages 6 to 8. Also, with increases in peer pressure, children tend to assume greater mastery over their behavior.

Similarly, a small number of middle-years children exhibit the normal behavior of rocking themselves to sleep in bed. They may curl into a knee-to-chest position and rock with such vigor that the bed shakes and even bangs the walls until they are fast asleep. A few children roll their

head back and forth, at times banging into the wall. Still others sit up and rock. As unsettling as parents may find these unusual habits, children may exhibit them every night in order to settle into sleep. The rhythmic motion seems necessary to soothe or calm the central nervous system in the transition from wakefulness to sleep.

Other habits

Fingernail biting, cuticle picking, hair twirling and nose picking are also very common - and annoying - habits of childhood, developing between ages 3 and 6. This behavior may continue throughout middle childhood and perhaps longer. Like other self-comforting habits, they are tension reducers, "time-wasters," and seem to be outside of consciousness or awareness.

Frequency

The frequency and intensity of these habits tend to ebb and flow, often without apparent explanation or parental intervention. Some observers have noted that the child who bites his fingernails or picks his cuticles often causes bleeding or pain; perhaps this natural consequence plays a significant role in the eventual disappearance of the habit. In any case, these habits frequently fade with time.

Management of self-comforting habits

As a first step in the simple management of your child's self-comforting habits, ignore them! Most commonly, they will disappear with time. When you call attention to them with harsh words, ridicule, or punishment, the tension that the habit presumably relieves will increase, and the habit will get worse. Punishment is not an effective way to eradicate habits.

Ignoring these habits, however, can be a difficult process for most parents. After all, if the mother or father finds a habit irritating or frustrating, ignoring it does not make the feelings disappear. Even so, try to withhold your negative comments and wait for the habit to pass.

If your child sucks her thumb or bites her fingernails, she may be interested in overcoming the habit and thus will cooperate with your own efforts toward that goal. Try using these techniques:

- When you notice that your child is not doing the behavior for extended periods, reward her in some agreed-upon way.
- Use over-the-counter agents, such as bitter-tasting compounds that can be placed on the fingers or the cuticles, to remind your child when she begins to bite or suck her thumb. This approach has a relatively low rate of success, but it is simple and, with your youngster's cooperation, may be an effective strategy. Ask your pharmacist about these products.
- Positive reinforcement is the most successful way to produce a change in behavior. Accentuate and reward the new behavior you want to see adopted. Star charts and daily rewards are very helpful.

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