

THE DUMMY DEBATE

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Pacifiers, dummies or soothers have been used in childcare for centuries. Ancient Egyptian art shows their use. Current research about the prevalence of dummy use in western countries ranges from 26% to 68%, generally decreasing with age. Dummies stand in for a mother's breast. They are used to calm and soothe a distressed infant, to prevent thumb sucking and as an aid to weaning.

Sucking is a survival response in babies. Without this instinct they may not get the nourishment they need to thrive. Babies quickly learn that this is one pleasurable thing they can do of their own volition. Sucking soothes and settles them. The steady rhythm, the concentration on one task and the pleasurable stimulation of nerve endings helps babies pull themselves together. When a mother's breast is not available, pacifiers are a convenient substitute. There are many documented pros and cons about the use of pacifiers. There are times when dummies serve good and useful purposes and there are times when a dummy just can't do the job and one should question their use.

BENEFITS OF SOOTHERS

- Soothing a distressed baby that won't settle unless sucking on the breast and the breast is unavailable
- Decreasing the likelihood of thumb sucking
- May help children cope with separation
- There has been recent research, which suggests that pacifier use may be protective against sudden infant death syndrome (SIDS). However, a large study in the United Kingdom during 1999 did not confirm these findings and medical authorities advise caution until further research.
- Pacifier use has been shown to significantly reduce the length of hospital stay for pre-term infants.
- Dummies can give mothers necessary breaks when she has to attend to other children, or the baby is very colicky and her arms, breasts and patience are severely overtaxed.

DOWNSIDES OF DUMMIES

- Lactation takes at least 3 to 4 weeks to fully establish and because dummies are artificial nipples they can interfere with breastfeeding. The sucking action on a dummy or bottle teat is different from sucking at the breast. A baby who tries to suck at the breast the way she sucks on a dummy will quickly become frustrated, fussy and may refuse to nurse. She won't get much milk because she is not sucking properly. Dummy use may also interfere with a mother's milk supply because the baby will be spending less time stimulating the breast. Cutting feedings short and offering the baby a dummy may deprive them of the high-calorie, high-fat hind milk. **Try not to use a pacifier until the baby is 3 to 4 weeks old.**
- There is an increased frequency of oral thrush needing treatment.
- Dummies can cause dental malocclusion if used for extended periods.
- If dummies are sweetened they can cause dental caries.
- Research has shown that there is an association between the use of pacifiers and ear infections, which may be a causal one. The risk of ear infections is up to 3 times higher

in those who use a pacifier. If your baby suffers from ear infections it is advisable to reduce pacifier time or stop using them.

IF YOU CHOOSE TO GIVE YOUR BABY A PACIFIER

- Choose a pacifier, which suits the age of your baby. If it is too long or big, buy the younger age one
- The curved ones that wrap around the cheeks are the best
- The nipple needs to be firm, not hard nor squishy. Replace it as soon as it gets soft and often at teething time
- Always have 2 pacifiers of identical colour and type so there is always a clean one available. Do not clean it by sucking on it yourself.
- Wash in very hot soapy water, rinse and sterilize until the baby is eating solids. After that washing in hot soapy water should suffice.

WEANING YOUR INFANT OFF A PACIFIER

- At around 10-15 months, babies often start spitting the dummy out. As soon as this happens, be aware of it and don't be too quick to give it back to them.
- Some parents reduce the pacifier time to only at bedtime and once the child is asleep remove the pacifier.
- With older children, tell them they can have the dummy for 3 more months or until their birthday and then they will be too old for it.
- Sometimes, conveniently losing the pacifier or leaving at grandparents does the trick.
- Try replacing the dummy with cuddling a soft toy.
- Pacifiers can fill an emotional need, so use some caution when breaking the child of the habit. The weaning process may not be worth the emotional battle at the time and forgetting about it for a couple of months may do the trick. This may be particularly true if the child is going through a lot of major changes at the same time. Choose your battles.

References

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