



Assisting a Child with Annoying Habits

We received the following letter from a mother of twins about some common habits that children develop. They develop so easily, and sometimes are equally difficult to overcome. We hope that our advice to these parents will be of help to other parents as well in analogous circumstances.

Q. We have four-year-old twins. My daughter picks her nose and twirls her hair. My son sucks one thumb and chews his nails on the other hand. How can I help them get over these bad habits?

A. Twins bring many pleasures, but they also can double the number of problem habits to handle. Let's see if we can help.

Why children form habits: Parental modeling can play a role in bad habits, but usually parents are not engaging in these activities. Clearly there is some biological or genetic basis for these — fetuses suck thumbs in utero; primates groom themselves and their young by chewing and picking. Sucking a thumb, twirling hair, picking a nose and even chewing a nail provide children with pleasure, and they use pleasurable activities to counteract uncomfortable feelings, such as boredom, nervousness or sadness. Plus, manipulating their own bodies as their parents once did when tending to them often evokes a comforting memory of their loving connection with their mother or father.

Try ignoring behaviors: The best first step is to simply ignore the behavior. This is a particularly worthwhile approach to try for a few months if the behavior recently appeared or is long-standing but slowly receding. Ignoring bad habits is more easily said than done, however, because parents may convey their disapproval through facial expressions and body language, even

if nothing is said. Most children are exceptionally tuned in to their parents.

The bad habit is more likely to resolve if you can relax and truly believe that it will eventually disappear. Be consistent in ignoring the behaviors, even when the child is in public.

Mildly state disapproval: Sometimes ignoring is not the best approach. Perhaps you feel you need to address the behaviors because they occur in public or because they are not becoming less frequent. In these instances, you might say something like, "Please stop sucking your thumb. I don't like it when you do that."

A respectful, clear and mildly disapproving statement shouldn't inspire your child to repeat the behavior to get attention. Children who receive sufficient positive attention do not have any reason to seek negative attention; there's no need to go after attention that does not make them feel good if their cup is already full. Children only seek negative attention if they are not receiving the amount and kind of attention they deserve. If this is the case, the solution is to provide the loving attention they need.

You can consider giving a brief explanation for your request. The best type is one such as, "This is not what a thumb is for." Avoid saying or implying something that might embarrass, humiliate or scare your child such as, "Sucking thumbs is for babies; You are too old for this," or "If you keep sucking your thumb, your dentist will be upset and may do something that you won't like." Your child should not have to suffer the pain of these emotions, and when inflicted as a means of control, they weaken rather than strengthen the parent-child relationship.

Furthermore, if your son or daughter associates one of these negative emotions with the habit, your child may actually be more likely to continue it. Children often defy those who make them feel bad about themselves as a way to try to gain control over people who hurt them emotionally.

Find a substitute activity: Your son and daughter will need more help from you if you directly ask them to relinquish the pleasure of a problem habit. Help them find a substitute activity that allows them to use their hands pleurably in a constructive manner. Try not to be too obvious, and be sure not to take over and move their hands for them.

Children younger than your twins may not respond to a verbal message. For 2- and 3-year-olds, offering a substitute activity without the prior discussion may be a helpful approach. Such simple diversion can go a long way, especially if it is practiced consistently, the substitute is pleasurable, and the parent remains involved. Even something as simple as wiggling fingers together can work for a 2- or 3-year-old.

On the other hand, children older than 4 can become true partners in overcoming bad habits. Older children often begin to feel uncomfortable with their behaviors themselves, perhaps because peers are teasing them. In these cases, parents are better off if they de-emphasize their own disapproval of the behavior and become collaborators helping the child solve his own problem.

Make the habit less attractive: Finally, consider if something can be done to reduce the pleasure of the habit. For example, perhaps a braid or ponytail would make your daughter's hair less inviting. Well-manicured and trimmed nails may be less inviting to bite. However, we would not advise painting a foul-tasting liquid onto nails. Making a part of your child's body aversive to them - and under your control - may not be a good idea, and often does not work anyhow.

You might also consider some simple rewards. Rewards work best when a child needs a little boost to get over the final hump. Nail polish might be a reward for a girl who foregoes nail biting, for example. Encouragement and praise - with an emphasis upon their accomplishment of being strong inside - and your involvement in the substitute activities are always the best rewards of all.

Relax, maintain your expectations, understand that the habit is a bit like a mini-addiction because it brings pleasure and relief, and you can expect that the bad habits will recede into the past with time.