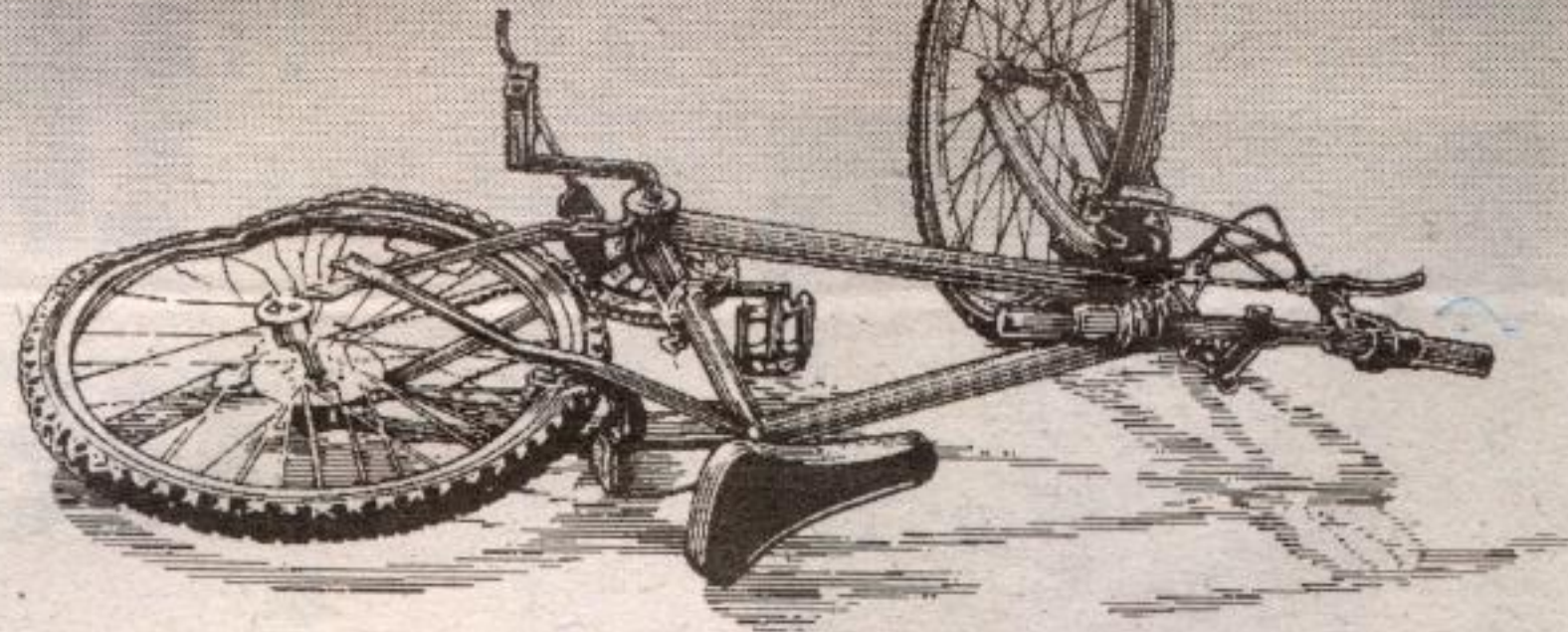


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Comfort Habits – are they good, bad or indifferent?

By Lydia Furman M.D.

Are comfort habits good, bad, or indifferent? To answer this question, let's look at some habits. Thumb sucking usually comes first to mind. Fetuses suck their thumbs in utero (inside mother), and we have ultrasounds to prove this. Some infants are even born with sucking blisters on their thumbs or fingers, although it then takes weeks after birth for most infants to purposefully find their thumb for self-consoling. But is thumb sucking good or bad? Shouldn't one "nip it in the bud" because it causes dental problems later on and looks "babyish"?

An infant who can console him or herself is starting to achieve "personhood" - loosely defined as being one's own person, not always dependent on others. For a baby this is quite a feat. Nipples and pacifiers may come and go, but one's thumb is always there, and learning to find it is a significant milestone that makes bedtime and fussy time a lot easier. Some but not all mothers can enjoy and appreciate this contribution of self sufficiency from the infant. So, viewed in this positive way, there is not a need to pull the thumb out of the mouth and substitute a pacifier (which can be

dropped or lost or taken away).

But wait, what about after babyhood? Doesn't the habit need to be stopped or it will never go away? Thumb sucking, like all comfort habits, is a helpful way of easing little tensions and soothing little stresses. If the baby gets enough nurturing and comforting from his mother (primary caregiver), isn't left for long periods to rely on self-comforting only, and doesn't have to undergo major stresses such as surgeries, thumb sucking will gradually disappear. It may surface at private times or pre naptime and pre bedtime, which is O.K. Other more mature, effective, and socially acceptable ways of coping develop with time and support, including verbalizing (putting feelings and ideas into words).

The American Dental Association emphasizes that thumb sucking does not cause dental problems until well after age 4-5 years, and that positive not negative approaches to helping the child are recommended. However, neither sticker charts and rewards nor punitive measures are likely to be helpful alone. For the older child who sucks his or her thumb noticeably and continuously, parents should seek guidance and referral because the child may need help in other areas.



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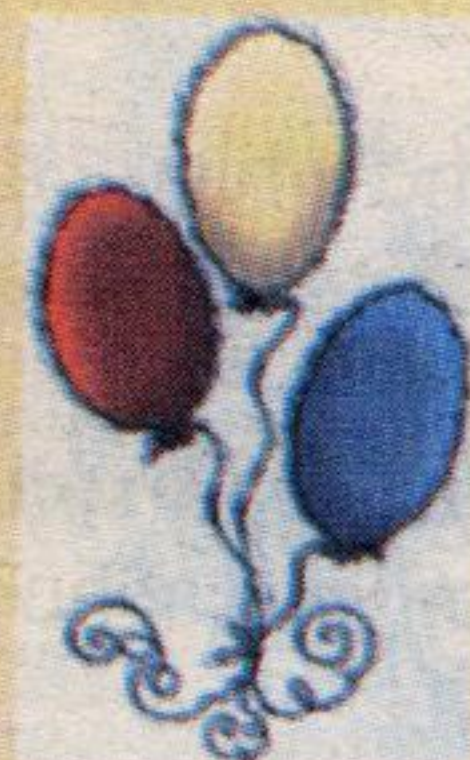


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