

Toddlers and dummies

Some babies are soothed and comforted by sucking and like to use a dummy. They will especially want their dummy when they are tired or distressed because it makes them feel calmer.

To avoid problems later, it may be a good idea if parents restrict when and how often a dummy is used. For example, if you choose to use a dummy, only let your child have it at sleep time.

Dummies may cause problems

Babies who use dummies may develop disrupted sleeping patterns. This is because they come to rely on the dummy to sleep and may become distressed and wake up if they lose the dummy during the night. Speech development may also be affected because it's hard to learn to talk with a dummy in your mouth.

Giving up may be hard

Over time a child may come to associate their dummy with feelings of relaxation and security. They may not want to give it up despite their parents' wishes. Ideally, the child should voluntarily give up their dummy when they feel ready.

Various strategies can help your toddler wean themselves off their dummy. You could start by restricting use of the dummy to bedtime.

Encourage self-weaning

Most children lose interest in their dummies. You can reinforce this behaviour by always placing your child's dummy in a particular place when they are not using it. Make sure the child can access it if they want to. Eventually, the child will seek the dummy less and less. You can then decide on your strategy and soon throw the dummy away.

Talk to your child

If you feel your child is ready to give up their dummy for good, talk to them about it. Suggestions include:

- Pick a time when your child is relaxed and happy.
- Don't nag, criticise or ridicule your child. You will only cause distress.
- Tell them you think they are grown up enough to do without a dummy.
- Identify why they want it – are they bored, tired, distracted or hungry?
- As the dummy is restricted, another favoured comfort item (such as a teddy or special blanket) might be chosen to take to bed instead of the dummy.

Decide on your strategy

There are basically two ways to break the dummy habit – quickly or slowly. When you and your child decide it's time to stop using the dummy, the quick option means you simply throw the dummy away. Having a little ceremony involving the child might be helpful. Be firm and gently remind them of their resolve not to use their dummy anymore. Try to distract them with other activities and help them find other ways to soothe and relax themselves.

If you decide to get rid of the dummy slowly, this means reserving its use for designated times only, such as going to bed. Your child could perhaps tuck the dummy under their pillow every morning. Once again, be firm but understanding. Over time, your child's attachment to their dummy will lessen, which means that throwing the dummy away will come easier. Avoid bribery or barter, such as making promises like "We'll give it to Santa or the Easter Bunny".

Use a reward system

Toddlers respond well to praise and encouragement. Think about using a reward system while your child is giving up their dummy. For children two years and older, you could set up a little chart with stars or stickers for a week or more. Compliment them often on their new behaviour and tell them how proud you are.

Resisting the change

Comfort objects can gradually become a habit as children approach school age, but children can also look for them when they are stressed and use them to help deal with anxiety. If your child seems despondent without their dummy, they may simply be tired or you may need to encourage them to use their words to tell you what is bothering them. Remember that changes in habits can take time.

Where to get help

- Your doctor
- Maternal and child health nurse
- Parent Line Tel. 132 289
- Tweddle Child and Family Health Service Tel. (03) 9689 1577
- Maternal and Child Health Line, Victoria (24 hours) Tel. 132 229

Things to remember

- Your toddler might need their dummy to feel safe and secure, particularly when they aren't with you.
- Ideally the child should voluntarily give up their dummy when they feel ready, rather than have the action forced upon them by others.
- If your child is adamant about keeping their dummy, or if they seem despondent without it, you need to find out what is bothering them.

This page has been produced in consultation with, and approved by:

Tweddle Child and Family Health Services

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