

Dummy Dilemmas

Is it a good or a bad habit? Professionals and parents alike have argued over the pros and cons of the ‘dummy’ for ever, in an attempt to establish whether its use/abuse, need/neglect is an aid to calming or is merely a hindrance to communication.

Studies (in the 1980’s) demonstrated that the tongue of the unborn foetus and newly born babies have specific tactile papillae which are specifically used for sucking and that these disappear by the sixth month. This generally coincides with the onset of weaning, of sensory integration and understanding of relationships with parents.

The need to suck will vary with each individual infant and the dummy’s use is determined by its physical and emotional make-up. The change from intrauterine to postnatal life can be overwhelming and therefore a ‘comforter’ whether a blanket, teddy or dummy, will help.

We can recommend the following:

1. Some **babies need** a dummy to calm down, others to ensure all is well and that waiting is not necessarily forever. Thumb-sucking is often an obvious alternative.
2. Most children **give up** the dummy as they grow older and lose their sucking papillae and become able to communicate distress in other ways.
3. If **parents are concerned** that the baby is overly fond of the dummy and cannot go without they should check:
 - a) For the way their child looks at people and interacts with them.
 - b) How actively their baby accommodates to family life and relates to them in different ways. **Parent’s concerns** are always important.
4. The **healthy use** of a dummy can, just as easily, be converted into abuse if used for prolonged periods and as a substitute for food or, alternatively, to silence a child. It is important to regulate its use, as one would (doubtless) do later with television!
5. Being **watchful** of your individual child’s needs. If, whilst sucking the dummy, he appears vacant and disconnected, be aware and mindful of what else might be distracting or overwhelming him. Explore fully.
6. Further **tactics** in helping you and your child separate from the dummy is to ‘rehearse’ with a toy or teddies, what you want to achieve with your child. Once it has been acted out many times over days, then one endorses that story onto the baby who will, surprisingly, take this on board.
7. Finally, **health warnings** come with the misuse of dummies through prolonged use during the day and/or over years as this can interfere with communication, or produce annoyance, frustration, even anger when the child is no longer interested in it. On occasion, a child can become overly attached to the “unusual friend” or “piece of mummy” is she is too busy and therefore unaware of his possible anxiety and feeling of loneliness. Understanding and talking to the baby will help develop inner security, better interaction and a healthier relationship.