

ParentLink guides use 'he' and 'she' in turn. Change to suit your child's sex.



**ACT**  
Government

Community Services

**From time to time most children develop habits that can be annoying, worrying and even embarrassing to parents. Parents may be afraid that their children will still be doing it when they are grown up. Usually there is a reason for the habit and dealing with the underlying reason will bring about a change. Sometimes it is just something that works for children at that age and that they will naturally grow out of. Making a child worried about a habit, by continually trying to change it, may make the habit last longer.**

## What causes habits?

- Some habits start because they are normal behaviours for young children that help them feel calm.
- Some habits develop because a child is learning to deal with the stresses of growing in a scary world, for example, sucking a dummy is one way that young children learn to feel safe in new situations.
- Some habits start, or continue, because a child is stressed about something that is happening in his life.
- Habits can be a way of children comforting themselves. They can be a sign that something is going wrong for your child.
- Some habits feel good and the child hasn't yet learned that the behaviour isn't something that is done in public, for example, masturbation.
- Some habits are due to a particular problem such as developmental delay, for example, continuing to eat dirt after the age of two.

Sometimes rewards can encourage a child who is trying to overcome a habit, but punishment rarely works because it makes the child more worried and more likely to need the comfort of the habit.

## Comforters

Having something to suck or hold can help babies and young children feel safe and calm at times of stress, change or separation from parents. Comforters are a kind of bridge to help young children learn to manage until old enough to feel okay by themselves.

- Dummies should not be given to babies before breast feeding has been established (different sucking motion)
- Young children may suck on a dummy, thumb, soft toy or special piece of blanket when they need comfort such as at bedtime or in new situations. For some children this can be for a lot of the time when they are about one or two years of age.

- Usually children give them up by about four years of age when they feel more secure in the world.
- It is not helpful to take away children's comforters while they still need them (especially for one and two year olds) because it can make them feel more anxious and upset. Even if they say you can 'give it to the fairies' they don't really understand that this means they cannot have it any more.

## What parents can do

- You can help children to give comforters up when you can see they are needing them less. Try suggesting that your child puts the comforter somewhere safe while she is busy playing and just get it when she needs it. Leave it in the child's control so she can get it herself and not have to ask for it.
- Try pinning the comforter inside your child's pocket so she can hold it when she needs to. Some children feel embarrassed to take their comforter to preschool with them but still need it in this new situation.
- If your child is still using her comforter a lot after four years, do what you can to make your child's life less stressful.
- Dummies do not do any damage to children's permanent teeth if they give them up before six years of age.
- Talk to your dentist if your child is still sucking a thumb a lot in the primary school years.

**Using comforters such as dummies or thumbs is very common. Children usually grow out of them. Trying to stop your child from using them is likely to make the habit worse. The best way to help your child is to provide a secure, interesting environment that is not stressful and where your child feels much loved.**

## Head banging

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About 5–15% of children bang their heads. It usually begins at about nine months of age and stops before four years. Some bang their heads for only a few minutes, while others can go on for several hours. More boys than girls bang their heads.

Head banging may occur with an ear infection, teething or emotional upset and is often a form of self-comfort when a child is experiencing physical or emotional distress.

Usually children don't harm themselves with head banging but if it happens so much that it interferes with your child's play or going to sleep, it needs to be treated seriously. Try to find out whether there is any reason for your child to feel upset or stressed and deal with the reason.

### What parents can do

- Check with your doctor to make sure there is no health problem.
- Pad the end of the cot so your child does not get bruised (make sure the padding is firm and your child cannot get his head caught in it).
- Give your child more loving attention when he is awake.
- Distract him by picking him up and comforting him, but don't mention the head banging.
- Have loving, happy bedtime routines before bed every night.
- Try not to put your child down to sleep until he is really ready to sleep.
- Try other relaxing activities such as massage or stroking when you find him head banging.
- Do not scold or punish. This will not help your child.

**Note:** Rocking is similar to head banging and can be treated in the same way.

## Breath holding

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About one in every 25 children under the age of five years hold their breath until they start to go blue or pale. It usually starts between six months and two years of age and can happen rarely or several times a day. Breath holding attacks are usually started by anger, frustration or pain, for example, when your child falls over and hurts herself, or when you say 'No' to something she wants.

There are two kinds of breath holding. One where the child goes blue and the other where the child is very pale. Most children have the kind where they go blue, some have both kinds. Children can become unconscious, have a brief convulsion (fit) or vomit. If your child becomes unconscious, she will automatically start to breathe again. There are usually no health problems causing the breath holding and it does not damage the child's health.

## Breath holding *continued*

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### What parents can do

- Make sure that your child is not in a situation where her life is too stressful.
- Have your child checked by a doctor to make sure that what is happening is breath holding and not a health problem.
- Place your child down on her side if she is unconscious and comfort her when she comes round. Try not to give her too much attention after a breath holding attack, so that she is not 'rewarded' for the behaviour.
- Reassure your other children that your child is not ill and is in no danger.
- If you are driving a car when it happens, stop, so you and your child will be safe from accidents.
- Breath holding is scary for you but it will not hurt your child. It is important not to always 'give in' to a child to avoid it happening.

## Nose picking

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Most children pick their noses (and many adults do too!) There are usually no health problems from nose picking except perhaps nose bleeds occasionally. Children usually pick their noses to remove dried mucus that is irritating them. It can happen with children who have rhinitis (hay fever) which causes itchiness in the nose. These children may continually rub or pick their noses. Most children stop doing it, at least in public, as they grow older and learn that it is not something that is done in public. Sometimes it may continue on, either because of continued irritation (rhinitis) or because of other stresses in their lives.

### What parents can do

- Avoid continually focusing on the nose picking or getting cross with your child. This is likely to make him anxious and make it worse.
- Gentle reminders should help your child to remember that it is not okay to do in public.
- Teach your child how to use a tissue to clean his nose and make sure there is always a tissue handy.
- Using petroleum jelly to soften the mucus will help if your child's nose is uncomfortable.
- Parents can feel embarrassed when their children do this in public. A quick request for your child to hold something for you can sometimes avoid this. For an older child, you may want to arrange a 'secret signal' between the two of you as a reminder.

## Teeth grinding

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About 15% of children and young people (and some adults) grind their teeth while they are asleep. Often they clench their jaws together very tightly. With some children this can cause their jaws to ache or cause headaches. If it continues and is very severe it can also damage the teeth.

As this happens during sleep, the behaviour cannot be changed by rewards or punishments.

### What parents can do

- Do not criticise your child or wake her up. This is likely to make it worse.
- Make sure that bedtime routines are relaxing.
- Think about what is happening in your child's world and try to remove any stresses that could be worrying your child.
- If it continues or is severe have a check with your dentist.

If teeth are being damaged or an older child is having headaches, a type of mouth guard/night guard may be recommended.

## Nail biting

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Many children bite their nails. It often continues into adolescence with about one in five university students still biting their nails. If it is severe, it can cause bleeding and infection but generally it does not cause any health problems. Children with flaky nails seem to be more likely to bite them.

### What parents can do

- Try to remove any stresses that could be worrying your child.
- Avoid continually reminding and criticising your child. This is likely to make it worse.
- Try putting mittens on your child at night.
- Give your child something else to do with his hands when relaxing or watching TV.
- Give encouragement and praise for small successes.
- Provide special nail care for older children, for example, manicures and nail varnish.
- Some people find bitter paint on nails helps, but this can be very unpleasant for a child and often does not work.
- Try to help your child not to feel ashamed if she has times when she forgets and bites her nails.
- Be mindful that stopping nail biting can be very difficult to do.

## Hair pulling

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This usually means a child is pulling hair from his own head, but can be from other parts of his body. He might twirl or stroke his hair as a habit. In young children pulling out hair usually does not last long or cause any health problems.

They often do it along with thumb sucking as a kind of comfort when they are tired or anxious. It can continue in some older children and can cause obvious bald spots.

### What parents can do

- Check with your doctor to rule out any health problem.
- Try to ignore it for children under three years. They will usually grow out of it about the time they give up other comfort activities such as the dummy.
- Try not to draw attention to it or criticise your child. This will make your child worried about it and then he will need the comfort it gives even more.
- Look for and try to remove any stresses that could be worrying your child.
- Give attention to hair styles and special hair care for older children, for example, short hair is harder to pull out than long hair.
- When you notice it do something else such as gentle scalp massage to help your child to relax.

## Coughing

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A cough that goes on is likely to be due to a physical problem such as post nasal drip, asthma or rhinitis (hay fever). Sometimes a cough that starts with a cold or other physical cause can develop into a habit. Habit coughs that are due to stress can be very different from an ordinary cough—louder and more obvious.

### What parents can do

- Check with a doctor to make sure there is no physical problem.
- Try not to draw attention to the cough because this is likely to make it worse.
- Look for causes of stress in your child's life and try to deal with these.
- If your child is old enough, encourage her to talk about any worries. Just knowing that someone is listening and understands often helps.

## Smoking

Older children and young people often start smoking to impress their friends or just to try and see what it is like. It is more likely to happen if there are smokers in the family. Sometimes they stop smoking after one or two tries, but it can become a habit that is hard to break because the body becomes addicted to some of the chemicals in the cigarette smoke (especially nicotine).

### What parents can do

- What you do yourself is important. Set a good example—don't smoke yourself, or if you do smoke make a determined effort to stop. You might let your children know that you wish you did not smoke.
- Make house rules, for example, no smoking inside the house or in the car.
- Explain to your children about the health risks of smoking, but don't 'harp' on it too much. A strong stand against something often makes teenagers become more determined to try something.
- Support your child in this period of his life—adolescence can be a very stressful time.
- Many people who try to stop smoking have to try several times before they are able to really give it up. Give your child encouragement for trying, not criticism for failing.

## Tics

Tics or habit spasms are movements that seem out of the child's control such as blinking, twitching of the face or jerky movements of the arm or shoulder. The child can usually stop it for a short time if asked, but it comes back when she is not concentrating on stopping it. These are often caused by stress in the child's life but can be caused by underlying health problems, and by some medicines. Blinking a lot may be caused by eyesight problems. Check with a doctor.

## Masturbation

- See ParentLink guide *Children's sexual behaviour*

## Reminders

- Check with your doctor to make sure the habit is not being caused by any health problem.
- Look for and deal with any stresses that your child may have.
- Work out what helps you relax, it might help your child as well.
- Watch your child and get to know what helps him to feel calm.
- Children need lots of parental time and affection as well as freedom to play and explore, and not too many 'Nos'.

## Contacts

<b>Child and Family Centres</b> (parenting information and support)	9am–5pm Monday–Friday: Gungahlin	6207 0120
	9am–5pm Monday–Friday: Tuggeranong	6207 8228
	9am–5pm Monday–Friday: West Belconnen	6205 2904
<b>Kids Help Line</b>	24-hour	1800 55 1800
<b>Parentline ACT</b>	9am–9pm Monday–Friday, except public hols	6287 3833

## Websites

<a href="http://www.cyh.com">www.cyh.com</a>	Parenting and child health information
<a href="http://www.kidshelp.com.au">www.kidshelp.com.au</a>	Kids helpline
<a href="http://www.parentlink.act.gov.au">www.parentlink.act.gov.au</a>	Other parenting guides
<a href="http://www.raisingchildren.net.au">www.raisingchildren.net.au</a>	Covers a broad range of up-to-date parenting topics

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