



# Brush Up on Oral Health

## Oral Habits

Oral habits are behaviors that involve the oral cavity. The oral cavity includes the tongue, lips, roof of the mouth, teeth, and gums. Some oral habits can cause problems in the future. Head Start staff can help parents identify oral habits that may be harmful and offer strategies for helping children stop these habits.

This issue of *Brush Up on Oral Health* describes two common oral habits in young children. It also offers strategies that Head Start staff can share with parents to make sure their child's oral habits are safe and to stop oral habits that may damage their child's teeth or mouth. A recipe for a healthy snack to make in the Head Start classroom or at home is also included.

### Did You Know?

- Non-nutritive sucking is the most common (70 to 90%) oral habit among young children.
- Mouth breathing is the second most common oral habit among young children.



## Non-Nutritive Sucking and Mouth Breathing

Two common oral habits in young children are:

**Non-nutritive sucking.** Sucking on a thumb, finger, hand, pacifier, blanket, toy, or other non-food item is called non-nutritive sucking. This type of sucking helps comfort children when they are tired, nervous, upset, or restless.

**Mouth breathing.** Breathing through the mouth rather than breathing through the nose is called mouth breathing. It happens most often when children cannot get enough air through their nose. During physical activity, some children breathe through both their mouth and nose. This provides more oxygen to the muscles and is considered normal. However, some children breathe only through their mouth during rest, which is not normal.

## Strategies for Head Start Staff to Share with Parents About Oral Habits

**Using pacifiers.** Pacifiers help satisfy a child's need to suck. Using pacifiers does not harm young children, as long as they are used safely. Pacifiers should never be used to replace or delay meals. Head Start staff can give parents these tips on safe pacifier use:

- Use a one-piece pacifier made of sturdy material that is firm and flexible
- To prevent choking, do not attach a pacifier on a ribbon or string, and never tie it to a crib or around a child's neck or hand
- To help make sure the child does not develop tooth decay, do not dip a pacifier in sugar, honey, syrup, or other sweet food
- Clean pacifiers with water often, and replace them regularly
- Parents should not clean a pacifier by putting it in their mouth and then giving it to the child, which can pass bacteria that cause tooth decay from parent to child



**Ending non-nutritive sucking.** Most children stop non-nutritive sucking between ages 2 and 4. Children who use pacifiers, blankets, toys, or other non-food items usually stop earlier than children who suck on a thumb, finger, or hand. Sucking past age 4 can change the shape of a child's mouth and teeth. For example, it can cause "buck teeth." Changes in the shape of a child's mouth and teeth can cause a child to breathe through their mouth instead of their nose. The changes can also cause speech and bite problems.

Here are four strategies Head Start staff can share with parents to help a child stop their sucking habit.

1. Talk with their child about why they want the child to stop sucking. Tell the child that they believe the child can stop.
2. Use reminders when the child wants to stop sucking but needs help. Put a bandage on the child's thumb or finger as a reminder not to suck. Putting a mitten or sock on the child's hand at night can also help.
3. Give the child something to track small successes. For example, put a star on a calendar for each day the child does not suck. At the end of a set period of time, give the child a reward for not sucking. Choose a reward that is not food.
4. Talk to the dental office staff, a pediatrician, or a speech therapist about other strategies to help a child stop sucking.

**Ending mouth breathing.** Children who breathe through their mouths are at greater risk for developing tooth decay and gum disease because their mouths become dry. They may have difficulty closing their lips together (see photo above). These children may be at risk for sleep disorders that can affect their growth, ability to learn, and behavior.

In most cases mouth breathing occurs when something blocks the nasal airway or if the nasal passage is narrow. If Head Start staff notice that a child's lips are slightly apart or don't meet while the child is sitting still, they should encourage the parents to take their child to the child's doctor or dentist to determine if the child should be referred to a specialist to address the problem.

## Cook's Corner: Pita Trees

Here is a delicious and healthy snack that children can make in a Head Start classroom or at home with their families.

### Ingredients

- Four whole wheat pita pockets
- 16 pretzel sticks, cut in half
- ½ cup fat free sour cream
- ½ cup guacamole
- ¼ cup red bell peppers, finely chopped

### Directions

1. Cut each pita pocket into eight wedges.
2. Push a pretzel stick half into the center of the bottom of each wedge to form a tree trunk.
3. In a small bowl, mix the sour cream and guacamole.
4. Spread 1 teaspoon of the sour cream guacamole mixture on each pita wedge.
5. Sprinkle a few bell pepper pieces on each pita wedge.

**Makes 32 servings**

**Safety tip:** An adult should slice the ingredients.

## Contact Us

The National Center on Early Childhood Health and Wellness welcomes your feedback on this issue, as well as your suggestions for topics for future issues. Please forward your comments to [health@ecetta.info](mailto:health@ecetta.info) or call 866-763-6481.

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