

## Do dummies affect speech?

The use of dummies, also called pacifiers or comforters, is a common practice in many countries. Dummies have been used with young children for many years - evidence of them have been found in Cypriot and Roman graves dating from as long ago as 1000BC. A dummy is an object “that a baby is given to suck so that the baby feels comforted and stays quiet” and is usually made of rubber or silicon. Despite their popularity and long history, the use of dummies is a controversial topic amongst professionals and parents/carers.

### Advantages

For parents and carers, the most important advantage of the use dummies is their role in helping babies settle down to sleep or to soothe them. Some studies show that dummies can help establish good sucking patterns in very young babies, especially those born prematurely. A number of research projects have begun looking at a correlation between dummy sucking and Sudden Infant Death Syndrome (SIDS) and whether using a dummy lowers the risk of SIDS. This area of investigation is very new and SIDS support organisations do not recommend the use of dummies as a preventative measure.

### Disadvantages

There are a number of disadvantages associated with the use of dummies, most of which impact upon the child's speech and language development. The many critics of dummy use include the World Health Organisation which says that dummy use may encourage the child and mother to stop breast feeding earlier than is in the best interests of the child. Other concerns raised by various professional groups include the increased risk of:

- stomach and mouth infections;
- middle ear infections (otitis media). This is due to the fact that sucking opens the Eustachian tube, which links the nose and middle ear, and this can allow bacteria into the middle ear from the nasal area;
- dental problems such as open bite and cross bite;
- overdevelopment of the muscles at the front of the mouth compared to those at the back of the mouth which may lead to a persistent tongue thrust and further effect placement of the teeth;

- reduced babbling and experimentation with sounds. When a baby or young child has a dummy in their mouth they are less likely to copy sounds adults make or to attempt to babble and play with sounds themselves. This is important in the development of speech skills.

One author suggests that it is better to let a baby suck on their own fingers or hands, rather than an artificial object, as they will get more sensory feedback which is comforting, and they are more likely to stop the behaviour when they are developmentally ready.

### **Advice for Parents & Carers**

There is a lot of confusing advice available about the use of dummies and it is important to be aware of the range of arguments. Dummies may be useful in settling young babies and encouraging strong sucking patterns, but their specific usefulness declines after a developmental age of about six months. The increased risk of ear infections, dental problems and limiting of babbling and use of sounds (both of which are essential in the development of speech and language skills) are all very good reasons for not giving dummies to infants after about one year of age, especially during the day and when they are interacting with other children and adults.

Note: This information has been taken from the talking point website.

<http://www.talkingpoint.org.uk/parents/speech-and-language/do-dummies-affect-speech>