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Understand Bad Habits

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Understanding a child's many habits and behaviors can be a struggle for parents. They might find themselves wondering how to stop a child from performing a behavior, especially if they think he is harming himself or others. However, different behaviors often can be a coping strategy for children. Many of these habits serve as a calming and soothing strategy for the child. When parents want to change a behavior or habit it helps to understand why a child is doing it in the first place.

Listed below are some behaviors found in some children's daily routine:

Thumb and Finger Sucking

Thumb and finger sucking typically starts within the first few months of a child's life. Many babies outgrow this before they turn one, and most stop completely by five due to peer pressure. Other objects that children suck might include pacifiers and blankets. Sucking has a soothing and calming effect that helps children sleep. However, it can become worrisome when it begins to affect the structure of the mouth and permanent teeth alignment.



Teeth Grinding

Bruxism, also known as teeth grinding or clenching, is seen in over half of infants. It begins around six months when baby teeth are coming in and then again around five years when permanent teeth begin to grow. Usually, the child outgrows it but it can continue into adulthood.



Head Banging, Head Rolling, and Body Rocking

These behaviors are often scary to parents, due to concern for injury. However, when children are performing these acts they are seeking a soothing sensation and do not appear to be in pain, but rather calm and content. This habit usually begins at nine months and resolves around two years.



Nail and Cuticle Biting or Picking

Nail biting or picking can be a concern if infection or bleeding occurs. To decrease this habit, give positive statements when your child is doing something else with their hands, such as, "I like the way you are placing your hands on the table and waiting patiently."



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Hair Twirling/ Hair Pulling

Both can be another source of self-calming for a child. It often occurs when the child is relaxed, bored, or tired. Most often, this habit stops on its own; however, a parent should be aware of a more serious condition where the child actually pulls out hair from the head, eyelashes, or eyebrows. This could suggest an underlying psychological problem and should be evaluated by a doctor.



While certain habits or behaviors can be frustrating for parents, below are few tips that might help break these patterns:



- Try ignoring the behavior. Your child will probably outgrow it, and giving a lot of attention to it might encourage them to continue.



- Praise your child for good behavior.
- If there are many habits to change, focus on the most bothersome. Do not try to change everything at once.



- Let your child make his/her own decisions. This will reduce stress and frustration.



- Redirect your child. Have them focus on something else.
- Use natural or logical consequences for a behavior or habit.

Parents often worry about their children and their behaviors. However, if they can understand a behavior and why their child is doing it in the first place, they may be more successful at eliminating that behavior in the long run.

Resources:

Bad Habits Annoying Behavior. (2017, April 18). Retrieved from University of Michigan Health System, <http://www.med.umich.edu/yourchild/topic/badhabit.htm>

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