



WHY THEY SUCK.

WHAT DOES THE RESEARCH SAY ABOUT PACIFIERS?

Research Report compiled and written by
Munchee Australia.

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BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

The following report has been written to share with clinicians who are working with very young children and concerned about the deleterious nature of pacifier or “dummy” use. A commonly held opinion is that these non-nutritive suck habits (NNSH) are disruptive to normal growth and development. Before making this statement however, a thorough review of the current body of published literature is a necessary step. Importantly, it is necessary to declare that Munchee has a commercial interest in compiling this report.

However more critically, within this evidence based context the Bebe and chew products have an opportunity to be a widely available and viable replacement for the pacifier. Further, these products may be useful aids to help treat or prevent some of the commonly reported deleterious effects of pacifier use.

PACIFIERS

Pacifiers (also known as a “dummy” or “binky”) have been recorded in history as far back as the 16th Century (1). These appliances are cheap and widely available although there has been a growing body of both clinical and published evidence demonstrating the adverse effects of their use.

Soothing children with pacifiers has been controversial for decades (2) despite this parents continue to use pacifiers for a number of reasons, namely for infant soothing, comfort and sleep (3) with the prevalence of pacifier use estimated between 60-80% (4) with many using pacifiers for longer periods during the day rather than simply to soothe or comfort at specific times such as bed time or car travel.

Evidence shows advice on initiating pacifier use is primarily from the mother themselves, the child’s grandmother or midwives (3) suggesting that those professionals who may deal with the long term effects of pacifier use in later years do not have a significant bearing on a mother’s decision making process. Qualified education for parents of infants and very young children is therefore identified as an important consideration within the framework of current evidence, particularly if a widespread health promotion initiative to reduce or prevent pacifier use is initiated.

METHODS

In performing the literature review, search filters were applied excluding papers published before 2000. For the purposes of this report searches were also segregated and performed under the broad headings of the bio-mechanical (structural), bio-chemical and psychophysical effects of pacifier use. The purpose of this segregation was to broadly categorise the effects of the pacifier utilising a published holistic framework that has typically been used to examine and describe dysfunctional breathing (5).

FINDINGS

The searches and topics of research papers were segregated into the categories within the framework identified above. Biomechanical included the structural effects of pacifier use and syndromes as a result of long term pacifier sucking. Those chosen as Biochemical papers demonstrated some form of metabolic consequence (e.g. obesity) while the Psychophysical papers were categorised by examining either the choices and reasons behind pacifier use and long term psychosocial outcomes for the child. The following table breaks down how the papers and outcomes examined were classified into each segment.

Biomechanics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Contribution of NNSH to malocclusion • Influence and impact of pacifier use on breastfeeding outcomes • Soft tissue dysfunction including lip and tongue rest posture • Swallow dysfunction and pacifier use
Biochemistry	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Early childhood weight and obesity outcomes • Pacifier use and breast versus bottle feeding • NNSH and risk of SDB • Pacifier use and recurrent Otitis Media
Psychophysical	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Soothing nature of pacifier use • Pacifier use and adult's responses to infant emotions • Relationship between pacifier use, emotional competence and conceptual relationships • Parent's choices to use pacifiers • PND and pacifier use • Object attachment and imprinting in young children • Assumed beliefs and knowledge on pacifiers among parents • Efficacy of cessation interventions for NNSH

A summary of the findings of each section is expanded upon below. Please note that for each section there are a separate numerical reference lists which can be found in the references section at the end of this document.

1. BIOMECHANICS

The most prominent outcome in the reviewed literature is centered on the effects of pacifier use on the developing dentition. We examined 18 papers and their citations reporting correlations between pacifier use and malocclusion. In addition, some papers presented results demonstrating a negative effect on breast-feeding outcomes correlated to the duration of pacifier use. Research also drew conclusions on pacifier use and dysfunctional oral rest postures, soft tissue health, arch development and critical motor patterns such as suck and swallow. The following details the findings of each sub-category.

Occlusion:

- There is a marked consensus that NNSH, in particular pacifier use, extended beyond the age of two increases the chance of malocclusion approximately 4 fold (1, 4, 6)
- The longer the duration of pacifier use the higher the chance of malocclusion, up to 22 fold (1, 6, 10)
- Cessation of NNS habits does not necessarily mean reversal of malocclusion. Longer periods of pacifier use can correlate to malocclusion in mixed dentition (40,
- The most common presentations of malocclusion associated with pacifier use and NNSH were: anterior open bite, posterior cross-bite and increased overjet (6, 8, 68, 76, 91)
- Posterior cross-bite was the most commonly reported malocclusion and was correlated to length of time a child continued using a pacifier (6, 26, 40, 54, 76, 84, 93)
- Early treatment of posterior cross-bite is recommended in an attempt to prevent these malocclusions persisting to permanent and/or mixed dentition leading to mandibular and temporomandibular disorders and/or craniofacial asymmetry (53)
- Associated habits of finger sucking, bottle feeding and mouth breathing also contributed to malocclusion and to time taken to correct occlusion (5, 8, 10, 56)

- Bottle feeding is also associated with malocclusion and furthermore, those feeding by bottle in the first 6 months of life were also more likely to use a pacifier (68)
- Breastfeeding and breastfeeding duration reduced the risk of malocclusion up to 5 fold (78)
- As a preventative strategy pacifier use must be phased out by 7 months and replaced by mastication (94)
- The duration of sucking and/or having a pacifier in the mouth is correlated to development of malocclusion it is therefore critical to encourage parents to limit duration. For example, if used as a settling aid it should be used at sleep time and not overnight (26, 40, 54, 78, 93)

Breastfeeding Outcomes:

- Pacifier use for premature and critically ill babies in ICU does not appear to negatively affect breastfeeding relationships (11)
- Pacifier use during a regular post-birth hospital stay is however associated with decreased likelihood of breastfeeding beyond 10 weeks (11)
- Observational studies suggested early pacifier use may interfere with breastmilk production and lead to early discontinuation of breastfeeding although evidence is not conclusive (12)
- It is theorised that use of pacifiers can alter or change the sucking technique of an infant to be more superficial with shorter sucks and no formation of vacuum (11)
- A suggestion is pacifiers increase the number of times a child suckles per day and consequently there is less stimulus for milk production and early weaning (11)
- Breastfeeding for 12 months or greater was shown to significantly reduce the risk of malocclusion (78)

Soft Tissue Dysfunction:

- Oral myofunctional characteristics that were significantly associated with pacifier use were resting lip position, resting tongue posture, shape of hard palette and swallow pattern (52, 75, 84)
- Altered swallow pattern is the most likely myofunctional outcome of pacifier use (56, 75) • Duration and frequency of pacifier habit were again associated with myofunctional dysfunction (84)
- Children using a pacifier had a higher incidence of mouth breathing (56) • With increased frequency and duration of use there may be tendency for hyper function of the buccinator muscles (84)

- Other results identified inadequate lip and cheek tone, poor tongue rest posture and tongue thrust during speech as significant myofunctional outcomes (52, 56, 75)
- Clinicians identifying these traits should refer and/or treat in a multi-disciplinary team (52, 56)

2. BIOCHEMISTRY

Within this section of our analysis we examined ten papers related to metabolic and/or disease/infection processes under the loose heading of biochemical responses. Pacifier use has a measurable effect on weight gain, breastfeeding outcomes and an increased association with bottle feeding.

We reviewed a number of studies demonstrating a causal relationship between pacifier use and acute Otitis Media (ear infection) and recurrent otitis media a common and costly condition that is statistically linked to pacifier use. Finally, sleep breathing in infants is fortified by breastfeeding with no benefits shown using a pacifier. Pacifiers have however been shown to be effective in the prevention of SIDS.

Body Composition:

- Pacifier use was associated with more rapid weight gain in 0-6 months and a higher incidence of being over-weight at ages 1-2 years (1)
- Pacifier use can potentially lead to over-feeding to soothe stress (8)
- A reduction in breastfeeding or transition to bottle feeding can lead to an increased intake of cow's milk which can cause immune reactivity and increases in weight gain (49)

Otitis Media:

- Otitis Media is an extremely common condition with a high financial burden, over-use of antibiotics and surgical intervention (18, 20, 32)
- There are multiple references and studies demonstrating a relationship between pacifier use and increased recurrent acute ear infection (18, 20, 32, 37, 41)

- Parents with children suffering one or more bouts of otitis media should be educated on the increased risks of pacifier use on reoccurrence (32)
- Possible biochemical associations for increased rates of acute ear infection include increasing oral candida and associated colonisation of the mouth by cariogenic microbes. The reasoning is that pacifier sucking causes reflux of these pathogens through the nasopharyngeal secretions to the middle ear (41)
- These biochemical changes are also associated with the structural consequences of malocclusion and soft tissue dysfunction presented above, it is theorised these changes disturb the pattern of drainage of the middle ear via small alterations to the orientation of the eustachian tubes and alterations in the function of salpingopharyngeus (unpublished)

Sleep Disordered Breathing:

- NNS potentially has no effect on the severity of OSA and SDB however breastfeeding has been shown to significantly reduce the risk (13)
- Both breastfeeding and pacifier use have been shown in multiple studies to reduce risk of SIDS (13)

3. PSYCHOPHYSICAL

The psychophysical web related to pacifier use is extremely complex with no hard edge conclusions, solutions or obvious cause and effect. Much of the evidence is still emerging and based on theories which are beginning to be studied. We identified three sub-sections pertaining to the psychosocial outcomes of pacifier use having examined 16 papers and their citations.

Understanding this topic begins with the relationship between a mother's motivation to choose to use a pacifier, the immediate and long term social and emotional outcomes and what options and opinions and guidelines exist for both uptake and cessation of pacifiers. The following summarises our findings relative to each of these topics.

Motivation and reasons for choosing pacifier use:

- Pacifiers have a soothing effect on pre-term babies and babies in intensive care units and may contribute to pain management in these infants (1) however long term offers of pacifiers can provoke agitated infants on discharge (39)
- In Australia, pacifier use is linked to education level. Pacifiers were more prevalent in those with a high school education than those with a university education. This was consistent with results from Brazil (41)
- Pacifier use is linked to decreased breastfeeding outcomes and length of time breastfeeding in healthy mothers (37)
- In contrast, mothers suffering Post Natal Depression (PND), approximately 19%, have better breastfeeding outcomes when their infant is using a pacifier (34)
- Most women chose to use a pacifier based on their own volition, advice from mother or mother-in-law or advice from a mid-wife/child health nurse (41)
- Very few primary and allied healthcare practitioners have input into a mother's decision for or against pacifier use (41, 73)
- Published guidelines for health practitioners to follow when advising mothers are very limited and/or not published despite continued evidence on the deleterious nature of pacifier use (22, 66)
- Many mothers choose to use pacifiers as they believe "it is normal for babies to suck" or "babies need to suck" (66)

Emotional and behavioural ramifications:

- Pacifiers are believed to influence social and emotional development due to prevention of facial mimicry. Humans interact and bond by recognising and mimicking facial cues and expressions. Pacifier use prevents the infant from mimicking especially during play/interaction time. Infants should therefore minimise the use of pacifiers during waking hours (2)
- Mothers have been found to describe themselves as calm and more peaceful more often when their infants used a pacifier (2)
- Pacifier use appears to influence the infant/child's development of differentiation of abstract versus concrete concepts (3)
- Boys using pacifiers have more marked adverse social/emotional effects from pacifier use. Outcomes for boys are directly linked to length of use (3)
- Pacifiers disrupt both sound formation and mouthing movements that form the basis of speech and correct biomechanics of the mouth (21)

- It is proposed that the mouth is rich in Merkel cells (sensory receptors that respond to light touch) and pacifier use disrupts and dulls down the afferent sensory information necessary for speech, social and mouthing actions that contribute to development (51)
- There is a proposed theory of “imprinting” of an infant to a mother’s breast. Displacement of this imprint via NNS can lead to a sequelae of conditions associated with oxytocin deficit (51)
- One study reported there is a five fold risk for persons using a pacifier for at least 24 months to become a smoker in early adolescence or adulthood (42)
- Pacifier use can also disrupt the emotional cues of carers and siblings to the infant via perceptions of an infant’s ability to regulate mood and via loss of the infant’s facial expression (51)
- The mouth is used for sensorial interpretation of a child’s environment. Pacifiers disrupt an infant or child’s ability to place objects within their mouth (59)
- Alternatives include soothing mechanisms such as swaddling, rocking, soft music, singing and infant massage (59). All adverse social/emotional outcomes from pacifier sucking are correlated to length of use (3, 42, 59)

Interventions for cessation of pacifier habits (79):

- Cessation of NNS especially pacifier use can cause a high degree of discomfort for both parent/carer and child
- A review paper of cessation methods demonstrated there are a number of potential cessation interventions however it is not known which is most effective, if any are even effective and which are favoured by parents or children • Interventions included behavioural modification, positive and negative reinforcement, adverse taste and use of intra-oral orthodontic appliances such as palatal cribs.
- Evidence in this review was considered to be of low quality mostly due to bias of published interventions being related to specific products
- There exists a lack of quality evidence and well-designed studies for the cessation of pacifier use in infants and young children
- The data does suggest interventions involving both psychological and structural/functional intervention to be the most effective.
- This topic is critical for both parents and children due to the lengthy, uncomfortable and expensive nature of correction of structural and dental mis-alignment

CONCLUSIONS:

The use of the pacifier or “dummy” has a long and controversial history with a vast range of opinions, social pressures, misinformation and inconsistency of guidelines and advice among healthcare professionals.

Despite this there exists a large body of evidence drawing recurring and consistent conclusions. The inconsistencies of information and guidelines are amplified due to the complex relationship between each mother and baby dyad. Within every presentation there exists a unique mix of experiential, mental, cultural and educational inputs that must be taken into account.

Compassion, empathy and understanding is critical for new mothers and their babies. When discussing pacifier use health professionals must be respectful and maintain unconditional positive regard for the mother and baby. This is further highlighted where post-natal conditions such as pre-term or critically ill babies are involved or for mothers suffering PND.

Thus while the evidence is clear, the need to navigate often difficult post-natal period can resort to mothers adopting pacifiers as a “means of survival”. A most critical outcome and finding across all the literature examined pertains to the length of use of pacifiers. All outcomes whether structural, biochemical or psychophysical were related to length of use in months and daily duration of use. The longer the pacifier was in the baby’s mouth and the length of time the infant/child used a pacifier for, the less favourable the outcome.

To summarise;

- Pacifiers may be helpful up to 6 months however they should be used in a limited capacity and for the least amount of time possible unless a baby is critically ill or highly unsettled
- Discontinue the use of pacifiers after 6 months, particularly when the infant is transitioning to solid foods as sucking interferes with the establishment of functional chewing patterns, their associated neurology and with craniofacial growth.
- If pacifiers are continued beyond 6 months the duration of use should be as minimal as possible and alternative settling and comforting should be encouraged
- Evidence clearly shows pacifier use continued for greater than 24 months significantly increases the likelihood of adverse outcomes.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

Having reviewed the critical factors of development that pacifiers appear to disrupt, we believe there are some important collective actions required by the healthcare cohort at large.

1. Education

- Initiation of mainstream public health promotion activities for the general public to help parents understand the risk to cost to benefit ratios of pacifier use and effect of length and duration of use. Specific attention should be given to education related to occlusion, recurrent otitis media and negative social outcomes which provide both the highest quality of evidence and the greatest costs to parents and society.
- Specific education to contact points for mother/baby dyads including GPs, community health nurses, midwives and lactation consultants regarding pacifier use and breastfeeding outcomes plus alternatives to the pacifier
- Specific education for mainstream dental and allied health practitioners who may be in contact with young families targeted to evidence on malocclusion and otitis media.

2. Guidelines for use

- Development and vetting of a consistent set of guidelines for healthcare practitioners and providers to assist in advising parents on their options and alternatives to pacifier use and useful information and protocols for cessation

3. Cessation Advice

- Further research is required to ascertain the best practice in cessation for both parent and child
- The quality of evidence within the realms of cessation is currently very poor so there exists great opportunity to innovate within this context
- At Munchee we have a “Munchee Hypothesis” that the prongs on the Munchee coupled with the chewing action can offer very young children who are sensorially attached to their pacifier an easy alternative. We have trialled this anecdotally within both chiropractic and myofunctional therapy contexts and are developing products and programs to help children progress from a prolonged infant suck pattern maintained by a pacifier to a correct chewing and swallowing action.

The issue of pacifier use seems to remain embedded in emotion and uncertainty coupled with a degree of misunderstanding and misinformation. The reference list for this report indicates a large body of work that demonstrates consistency across papers relating to malocclusion, otitis media, breastfeeding outcomes and length and duration of use.

While these outcomes may be eluded to within the sentiment of general public it is our hope that by collating this research we can help arm health professionals with the information and context required to consciously educate the public. In particular, we hope mothers can become aware of the potentially deleterious effects of pacifier use, the safe timeframes and the available alternatives.

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References

The following comprehensive reference list cites the major papers we examined and subsequent citations contained within that have influenced the reported findings. Thus forming a comprehensive resource list for those wishing to further investigate the evidence on pacifier use.

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