

**The New York Times**

# Declaring War on Thumb-Sucking Leaves Battle Scars

By  
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July 20, 2015 3:17 pm

A few months ago, I left the pediatrician's office feeling as if I had failed my children — and myself. With a new baby at home, my husband, Brandon, and I had become decidedly lax about our twin toddlers' coping habits. One used a pacifier. The other sucked his thumb.

"If you don't put a stop to it before they're 3," our pediatrician warned, "their teeth will be set and the damage will be done." Translation: We'll fork over a fortune in orthodontics.

So I cooked up an elaborate scheme to make the transition fun, and searched the Internet for thumb-sucking deterrents. What I found was "Dr. Thumb," a crafty gadget made of soft silicone to break the vacuum created during thumb sucking. It slips over the child's hand like a glove. The child can still put his thumb in his mouth, but without the "sucking sensation," the promotional copy declared, the habit will no longer be pleasurable and the behavior will stop within two weeks. A bonus: It had none of the punitive effects child development experts shun (hot sauce, anyone?).

We bought one for each boy and called them "superhero gloves." Even though Brian, our pacifier-junkie, didn't need the guard, we couldn't proclaim one boy a superhero and not the other. Plus, we were hoping Brian would exchange his pacifier for the thumb guard. You know, so he could have special powers like his brother, Max.

On Easter morning, before the boys came downstairs, we placed the new thumb guards in their Easter baskets amid a sea of Dollar-store gifts.

“Whoa, what’s this?” shouted Brian as he held up the Dr. Thumb box.

“It’s a superhero glove,” I explained. “If you wear it around the clock, you’ll have super powers ... but you have to give your Binky to the Easter Bunny first.”

The boy who couldn’t sleep without a pacifier, whose favorite toy was a paci with a stuffed horse attached, relinquished his beloved Binky immediately.

Max was equally transfixed — at first. But when naptime rolled around, things turned sour fast. Amazingly, he managed to wriggle out of his guard the first day and refused to put it back on.

With a lot of cajoling (I’m not above bribing my children with toys, TV, even ice cream), we got the guard back on Max’s hand and secured it at the wrist. When Max discovered he couldn’t break free, he was furious.

The first night Brandon and I took turns lying on the floor beside Max’s bed to help him feel safe. It was like watching a drug addict go through withdrawal. He was crawling out of his skin; tossing, turning and periodically whimpering. He looked like a fish out of water, flipping and flopping, denied one of the very elements of his existence. He wasn’t sleeping, but he wasn’t screaming either, so I figured we were making progress.

The trouble was, I was a wreck. I think I shed more tears than Max. It was awful to watch him struggle and know that we — the two people who loved him most in this world — were responsible for his agony. I almost pulled the plug, but the pediatrician’s warnings reverberated in my brain. Reluctantly, we forged ahead.

Day 2: Brian was still happy as a clam. He was so enamored with his new glove he refused to take it off. Even at bath time. And he never mentioned his Binky. Not once.

Max? He was still writhing like a heroin addict craving a hit. He dropped his nap — either because he couldn’t sleep without sucking his thumb, or as an act of defiance — we’re still not sure. What was clear was that our potty-trained thumb-sucker, who had gone months without an accident, was wetting his pants. Several times a day.

Sure, Max hadn't sucked his thumb in a week, but we were engaged in a painful power struggle. And he was winning. During one particularly trying incident after a bath, he screamed at me. I screamed back. Then he looked right at me and peed on the carpet.

He wanted revenge. Understandably. We had taken away his security. We didn't do it to be cruel, but he didn't know that. Me? I worried about the lessons we were teaching our son by taking away his thumb.

By Day 7, Max began tugging on the guard, trying to get it off. He pulled so hard he inflicted wounds on his wrist.

That ended Dr. Thumb's reign over Max's thumb. I was done. Within 10 days, Brian abandoned Dr. Thumb, too. Apparently, the guard didn't wield the same power without his brother sporting one.

As it turned out, Dr. Thumb made good on his promise. Max never sucked his thumb again. He never napped again either — at least not reliably or voluntarily. And he wet his pants on occasion to get our attention for months (he has since stopped).

When I asked Eileen Kennedy-Moore, author of "12 Ways to Get Your Parents' Attention Without Hitting Your Sister," how to undo the trauma I inflicted on my son, she confirmed what I already knew: We can't give our children stress-free lives. They need to face challenges to develop confidence and learn that they can get through the rough patches, and that they're stronger than they thought. And I needed to learn that while I may regret certain parenting decisions, that doesn't make me a bad mom.

Recently, the boys rediscovered their thumb guards in a neglected toy bin. Max donned the glove all day, happy because he could take it off whenever he wanted. Me? At the sight of it, I felt like the one who needed a Binky.

Are Max's perfectly spaced pearly whites worth the time he spent in withdrawal? I'm not sure. Maybe the real problem isn't my parenting, but a society that prioritizes straight teeth over comfort and security.

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