

Tips for Parents by Susie Kohl

Self-Soothing Behaviors a Coping Mechanism

ADULTS ARE OFTEN CHAGRINED by the sensory habits children form to release tension. Few adults suck their thumbs or hold a favorite blanket or kick a table leg during a business meeting—though some might still bite their nails. Adults' ways of releasing tension range from running marathons to meditating to sipping mimosas, all culturally accepted approaches to unwinding. None of these activities seems developmentally appropriate for children (though exercise helps at every age).

Some adults engage in tension-release activities that might work for children, like squeezing a ball, manipulating beads, or sorting laundry. Rhythmic activity like sorting is soothing at every age, especially walking. When a child is upset, suggest taking a little walk together to discuss her feelings.

It's only in recent years that adults have realized that children suck their fingers or twirl their hair as a tension outlet. In the past, such self-soothing techniques were viewed as “naughty” habits—behaviors that called for shaming or punishment.

Renowned psychiatrist and author Alice Miller once wrote about a real-life shaming she happened on while hiking in a German forest. Children were gathered to meet Father Christmas in happy anticipation of Christmas. However, Miller was horrified to hear mothers derisively complaining about their children in front of the group, saying, “Johnny was a bad boy. He sucked his thumb all year.” Where does a child turn when his protector tattles on him for trying to soothe himself? Alice Miller, though just a passerby, stepped forward and defended one little boy, declaring that he would know when he was ready to stop sucking his thumb.

In their informative book *Children and Behavior*, based on the Gesell Institute's groundbreaking studies in child development, Louise Ames and Frances Ilg discuss the wisdom of being careful about abruptly cutting a child off from habits that release tension. Teachers have occasionally observed dramatic reactions when children were pressured to give up a pacifier or favorite soothing object, even in a positive way. Ames and Ilg offer an insightful analysis of thumb sucking and other self-soothing habits. They reassure parents that finger sucking has a natural cycle and cessation, usually before permanent teeth arrive. The book also offers suggestions for those who want to gradually substitute other kinds of soothing.

Of course, children vary in their needs “to let off steam” and the ways they do it. Sometimes an increase in self-soothing behaviors signal that a child is under stress. Rather than feeling embarrassed about our children's childish behaviors, we can approach them in a thoughtful way. “Has anything been worrying you lately?” We can think about possible sources of anxiety and create extra time with them.

Taking an oppositional or teasing stance about these habits puts children in a difficult position. It not only fosters shame but puts the focus on the child's attempts to cope rather than on our concern for their emotional well-being. The fact that older children and adults find new, socially approved ways of releasing tension shows us that worry about these childish outlets is a waste of our energy and theirs.

Sharing the ways we pay attention to those needs in ourselves will help create an important model. “When I need to calm down, I listen to music.”

We can ask when they might feel ready to put that silky blanket aside. But remember that few students take their blankie to college, though some are brave enough to bring their favorite stuffed animals. That child who needs special comfort still exists in all of us.

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