

The pros and cons of dummies

What a speech and language therapist should know

The pros of using a dummy:

Dummies are presumed to help settle babies to sleep. However, there is very little empirical evidence that exists to verify this.

Dummies are thought to facilitate the development of sucking in premature infants.

Dummies are presumed to help infants with gastroesophageal reflux (GOR). There is little research to support this position, however.

Dummies prevent sudden infant death syndrome (SIDS). Baker notes that to date, the nature of the relationship between dummy use and SIDS is not clearly understood.

The cons of using a dummy:

Dummies have been associated with an increased risk of gastrointestinal infections and oral candidiasis.

Dummies have been associated with an increased risk of middle ear infection (otitis media).

Dummy use (particularly prolonged dummy use) has been associated with dental cavities and dental malocclusion (the imperfect positioning of teeth).

Dummy use has been associated with nipple confusion and decreased breastfeeding duration.

Dummy use has been associated with more unusual problems, such as latex allergy and death as a result of choking.

Regarding dummy use and speech development:

According to Dr Baker "It would seem reasonable to suggest that articulation of bilabial, alveolar, palatal and velar sounds would be difficult with an object in the mouth. It would also seem reasonable to suggest that an alert infant sucking vigorously on a dummy would not be engaging in vocal play, producing raspberries or consonant and vowel-like cooing and babbling. It would also seem reasonable to suggest that an infant with a dummy in his or her mouth would have difficulty imitating facial expression and mouth movements."

Baker points out that unfortunately very little research has been conducted into the direct relationship between dummy use and speech development. However, she reminds us that given the relationship between dental malocclusion and speech problems, and recurrent episodes of acute otitis media and speech problems, it would seem dummies might have a role to play in speech impairment in children.

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