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Supporting your child to wean off bottles and dummies

Many children become closely attached to bottles or to their dummies. Both bottles and dummies may mean a lot to a child as they often use them for comfort and security.

However, we know that prolonged use of bottles and dummies can lead to a variety of problems – including tooth decay, nutritional problems and speech delay.

Bottle feeding and tooth decay

- Giving infants and toddlers sweetened liquids or drinks with natural sugars (like milk, formula, and fruit juice) in a bottle can cause tooth decay.
- Sugary drinks at naptime or night-time are particularly harmful as the natural saliva in the mouth that protects the teeth from acid is reduced.
- Baby teeth are necessary for chewing, speaking and smiling. If tooth decay is left untreated, pain and infection can result. Severely decayed teeth may need to be removed.
- If teeth are infected or lost too early due to baby bottle tooth decay, your child may develop poor eating habits, speech problems, crooked teeth, and damaged adult teeth.

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For additional fact sheets see www.ihv.org.uk

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Here are some tips to help you though these processes.

Weaning off bottles

From the age of 1 year, babies can switch from formula milk to cow's milk. This is an opportunity to begin to offer milk in a cup rather than a bottle. If you're still breastfeeding, you can continue feeding your baby breast milk as usual, but offer water from a cup. Breast-fed babies do not need to be given formula. However, all babies need vitamin supplements.

Many parents worry that when they take the bottle away, their child's milk intake reduces. The recommended amount of milk for a one year old is between 350-500ml per day. If your child is eating dairy products such as cheese, yoghurt or other dairy products in their diet, they can drink less milk. Too much milk will fill your child's tummy making them less hungry for solids and may also affect iron absorption.

Switching from bottle to cup can be challenging, here are some tips to help you:

- Start to introduce your baby to a cup from about six months onwards. By the time your baby is one, they should have stopped using bottles with teats.
- Choosing an open cup or a free-flow cup with a lid and without a valve will help your baby learn to sip rather than suck, this is better for their teeth.
- Comfort sucking on sweetened drinks is the biggest cause of tooth decay in young children. If you use a bottle or trainer cup, don't put anything in it other than infant formula, breast milk or water.

- As soon as your child is ready, encourage them to move from a cup with a lid to drinking from a cup.
- By 12 months of age, most infants have the coordination and ability to hold a cup and drink from it.
- If you don't want to just stop feeding from the bottles suddenly, start by reducing them gradually from the feeding schedule, starting at mealtimes.

If your baby usually drinks three bottles each day, choose a good time for you and your baby, perhaps when you're not in a rush or under pressure, and replace that bottle with milk in a cup.

- As you try to stop the first bottle, keep offering the other two bottles for about a week. That way, if your child asks for the bottle you can provide assurance that one is coming later.
- The next week, stop the second bottle, offer food first followed by some milk or water in a cup.
- The bedtime bottle tends to be a part of the bedtime routine and is the one that most provides comfort to babies. Instead of the bottle, try offering a cup of milk with your child's evening snack and continue with the rest of your night-time tasks, like a bath, bedtime story and teeth brushing. It might help to give your child a comforting object to cuddle with, like a blanket or a favourite toy.

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Here are some other things to keep in mind:

- When your child does use the cup, offer plenty of praise and positive reinforcement.

If you keep getting asked for a bottle, respond in a calm and positive manner, consider your baby's needs for comfort and reassurance, try to distract and offer alternatives, e.g. playtime or a snack.

- Get rid of the bottles or put them out of sight and ensure that other caregivers are providing a consistent response to requests for bottles.

Weaning off dummies

The Lullaby Trust advice is that should you start using a dummy, then you should keep going until the child is 6 months old. bit.ly/T3753t

Dummy use and breastfeeding:

- If a dummy is introduced too early, there's the risk of nipple confusion for a baby who's just learning to suckle. When a baby is being breastfed, it is best not to give a dummy until breastfeeding is well established, usually at about one month old.
- Parents can mistakenly offer a dummy when the baby really needs nutrition-based sucking, such as a breast or bottle.
- Babies who are overzealous suckers, or who use a dummy for long periods, may have problems as their teeth grow and develop. Overuse of a dummy can also hinder speech development, which is why it's recommended that you try to limit the times your baby uses a dummy, and to wean your baby off the dummy completely by the age of one.

Whenever you choose to wean your baby, you can make the transition to being dummy-free a little easier on you and your little one with these helpful tips:

- Prepare your child in advance for what you're going to do. Tell the child that in three days we're going to be finished with the dummy and I know you understand and that you can do it.
- Try limiting the time the dummy is used - perhaps only at naptime and bedtime. If necessary give a substitute comfort object such as a small new toy or book that the child can carry around for security.
- Offer praise, reward with hugs and kisses, positive attention and playing – having fun.
- Use a star chart or stickers. This can help with older children.
- Finally, try not to turn back. No matter how well you have prepared your child for this change, expect some discomfort and some protest.

If you need any further support with weaning your baby off bottles or dummies then you can seek advice from your local health visiting team.

You can also get more information from these websites:

NHS Choices:

bit.ly/1Rdywjq

bit.ly/1S8McNy

Lullaby Trust:

bit.ly/T3753t

For additional fact sheets see www.ihv.org.uk