FIRST "BAD HABIT"—SUCKING ITS THUMB

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HOW is it to be explained that these babies, when still too young to imitate what is going on around them and without being taught, acquire what many doctors and dentists declare to be a very bad habit? Baby mud-wasps which hatch after their mothers and fathers are dead know how to build their complicated mud nests without being taught. Are we sure that this human habit of thumb-sucking, which has appeared successively generation after generation in very young babies, is not of a similar instinctive or hereditary character?

If it is hereditary, is it beyond question injurious, and does it certainly produce protruding teeth and flattened thumbs, and does it arch the roof of the mouth, or are these changes merely coincidental with the habit? Are we confident that by employing forcible means to cure the habit we do not run the risk of affecting the child's emotional or moral nature—of making it secretive, or even untruthful? Should not the habit be cured by the ridicule of a child's peers on the playground—by its own self-control?

If this habit is hereditary, are not others of the same nature, and should we not, in our discipline of children, differentiate between the habits of imitation and those which are inherited?

According to Dr. Alexander Graham Bell:

The mere act of suction could produce no such effect as the protrusion of the teeth. On the contrary, with a partial vacuum in the mouth the atmospheric pressure from outside would tend to push the teeth *in*, not out. Theory would indicate that the act of suction should actually be beneficial to the plastic growing mouth by bringing atmospheric pressure into play from outside, tending to consolidate the mouth and oppose any tendency to the spreading of the parts.

Any spreading action could only be due to pressure applied from within. A child for example might press his tongue against the roof of the mouth or against the back of the front teeth and thus produce a pressure which if constantly applied would gradually result in a spreading action, but there is no evidence that a child ever does this.

Fig. 11.

Again it is conceivable that a child in the intervals between suction might press his thumb against the back of the front teeth but here again there is no evidence of active muscular effort. On the contrary the intervals between the acts of suction are characterized by relaxation of the whole muscular system, the child tending to fall asleep and the thumb tending to fall out of the mouth.

Sucking the thumb is such an instinctive action with very young children that it is probable that most babies, if not all, indulge in the habit during the first year of life. Some people have protruding teeth in adult life and if you examine their past history it is probable that most of them sucked their thumbs in infancy. Hence we are apt to jump to the conclusion that the sucking of the thumb was the cause of the protrusion of the teeth, in spite of the fact that will be at once perceived by those who know anything about atmospheric pressure that the act of suction could not possibly produce any such effect.

The idea that suction could produce a spreading action in the mouth is as ridiculous as the very common notion that sucking the thumb causes a child to become cross-eyed!

The importance of being able to make or break a habit at will was so drilled into me by one of my great friends that it has come to seem to me one of the greatest things in life. When the first baby came I determined that he should have a fair start. He should not be allowed to form any undesirable habit. Almost immediately, or certainly when he was only a week or two old, he got his thumb into his mouth. Everybody admitted that this was the beginning of a bad habit. Some predicted that he would make his front teeth protrude and spoil the shape of his mouth, others knew he would ruin the looks of his thumb, and others said that thumb-sucking was connected with internal disorders of a serious character.

With the impression firmly implanted in our minds that the forming of a bad habit was the worst thing that could happen to a baby, we began to try to cure this one of sucking his thumb. We tried cassia solution, but he enjoyed the bitter taste. We put tiny mittens on his hands, and he either sucked them until they were wet through or pulled them off. We tied his arms, but he always struggled loose. We bought those round aluminum hand balls which are supposed to be a real cure, but he

bumped his head with them and got into almost hysterical fits of temper.

The weeks stretched into months and we did not give up the fight. As the months became years we tried bribery and corruption. We threatened and we punished. When the second child came she followed in her brother's footsteps, with variations, and when the third baby arrived she embroidered the thumb-sucking habit by twisting her night dress or sheet around her third finger. By this time we began to realize that we were confronted by something which was not so simple as one of the habits of later life, and we finally gave up. There seemed to be something almost instinctive in the way this habit resisted our treatment, and we began to suspect a hereditary character in it.

Among some old photographs of the children's mother (perhaps luckily for the father none of his own baby photographs were on hand) we came across one in which she was shown sucking her thumb. By a curious coincidence we had had one taken of our eldest child at about the same age and in the same attitude without knowing of the existence of the mother's photograph. And while we were discussing this, it came up in conversation that the mother's mother had also sucked her thumb, and later the daguerreotype evidence of this was found.¹

The evidence seems strong to his parents that it was natural for the boy to suck his thumb and did not come from sheer wilfulness on his part.

If this is indeed an inherited instinct and not a personally acquired habit, the breaking of it may be a long and difficult task, and we should be very sure that it is indeed injurious before we waste our time and worry our poor little babies trying to do so.

What a weight would be lifted from the shoulders of thousands of young parents could they with clear consciences let their babies suck their thumbs in peace!

¹ The photographs here published, with the permission of all three babies, it is understood, are of Mabel G. Hubbard (Mrs. Alexander Graham Bell), Marian Hubbard Bell (Mrs. David Fairchild), and Graham Bell Fairchild. Each of these three babies has its right thumb in its mouth.