

Thumbs Up: An Interactive Computer Program for Habit Breaking

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Thumb- and fingersucking habits are as difficult to manage today as when Angle wrote about them in 1907.¹ This article describes a new computer software program written by Dr. Halvax to help his 6-year-old daughter, Nina (granddaughter and patient of Dr. Fink's), stop sucking

her thumb.

Nina's mother had invented a daily routine in which a magnetic star was placed on the refrigerator every day Nina did not suck her thumb. When a certain number of stars were accumulated, Nina was allowed to buy herself a small reward. After awhile, however, there were so many stars on the refrigerator door that no one could keep track of the rewards.

Seeking to mimic this system on his computer, Dr. Halvax designed a program for Windows called Thumbs Up. This software has now been used for two years in Dr. Fink's office and has proven to be an effective way to stop thumb- and fingersucking.

Procedure

As many as five children in a household can use this program at the same time (Fig. 1). Each child must "confess" to the computer how he or she has done every day (Fig. 2).

Points are awarded as follows: good day = 2 points; bad day = -1 point; good night = 3 points; bad night = -1 point. Once the child accu-



Fig. 1 Sign-in screen.



Fig. 2 "Confession" screen.

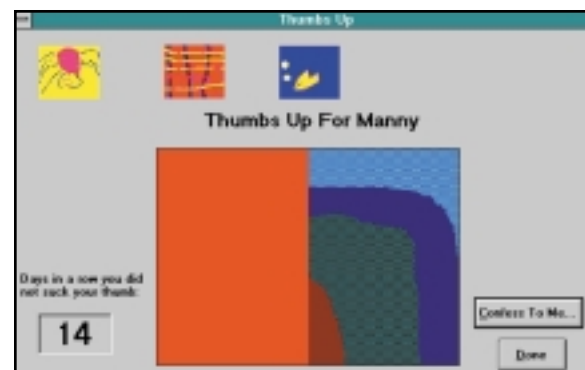


Fig. 3 "Status" screen, with partially displayed drawing and three finished drawings.

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Dr. Fink



Dr. Halvax

mulates 8 points, a drawing is displayed on the screen (Fig. 3). When all five drawings are displayed (40 points), the child earns a reward, which might be a T-shirt with the practice logo or a gift certificate to rent a video.

A maximum score of 100 points can be achieved by a child who never has a bad day or night. If more than one child is playing, a score-board can be displayed by clicking the “Kids” menu on the opening screen (Fig. 1), then selecting “Compare Scores” (Fig. 4).

When it is not possible for a child to use the computer on a particular day, such as during a vacation, the information can be entered later.

Discussion

It has been said that if you can stop a habit for 21 consecutive days, it is gone forever. In the end, of course, only willpower can break a habit. Experience with this program has shown that when relapses occur, many children will voluntarily start over. Some children may need to do this several times, but after each session the power of their sucking habits will have diminished.

Thumbs Up has been designed to be user-friendly for children. We have found that competition among siblings makes patients even more eager to use the program. Children can also make their own “reward” drawings using any “paint” software (the ones shown in Figure 3 were drawn by Nina Halvax).

After successful treatment, one has a patient of whom any grandfather would be proud (Fig. 5).

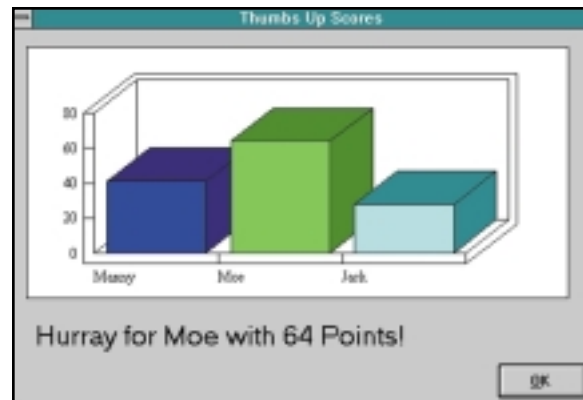


Fig. 4 “Score” screen.



Fig. 5 Nina Halvax after successful treatment.

REFERENCES

1. Angle, E.H.: *Treatment of Malocclusion of the Teeth*, 7th ed., S.S. White Dental Mfg. Co., Philadelphia, 1907, p. 104.