Son picks nose, gets teased: How can I help him stop?

Dear Alice,

I just read your reply to avid nose picker. I have a question: Is there a way of stopping? My son picks his nose and is being teased at school. Do you have any suggestions?

Answer

Dear Reader,

Although some folks indulge in their inclination towards nostril excavation well into adulthood, most children stop nose picking when they reach school age. Kids who persist at their picking once they hit school-age may hear a few probing comments from friends. If your son continues to pick his nose despite this negative feedback and/or teasing, he may need some parental assistance to help him learn to stop.

Before you stop the picker in his tracks, you may want to consider whether there are any underlying medical issues (such as allergies) that are keeping your son’s nose runny and itchy. If he is sniffle-free but avidly picking, then odds are that this has become a habit. If you have not already explained your objections to nose picking, now is the time to do so. You may want to highlight the potential health risks and consequences of nose picking, and/or point out to him that the teasing may stop if he stops picking. Perhaps any anxiety he may have about getting teased exacerbates the behavior. At the same time during this conversation, you can also listen to his feelings concerning his nose picking and being teased.

Alternatively, if you think your son is not aware of his behavior (for some people, nose picking becomes an unconscious habit), then you might try gently reminding him when he picks. Some experts suggest putting a bandage on the favorite finger so that it doesn’t glide easily into a waiting nostril, reminding him of what he is about to do. In addition, making tissues available around the house (and perhaps in his backpack) can serve as acceptable substitutes for his finger in case an irresistible urge comes up.

If you’ve already discussed these issues, and if your son continues to pick despite your pleas and rational explanations, it is possible that his nose picking is an issue of control. Body parts are one of the few things that children can control for better or for worse. Some children even enjoy getting a horrified reaction from parents as they perform certain behaviors (nose picking, burping, and farting are some of the many). If you suspect that your son has used nose mining as a way of digging at you, then your best response is to ignore the behavior, difficult as this may seem. You can leave the room, or request that your son go someplace...
private to pick his nose. If he sees that a finger up his nose no longer pushes your buttons, he will be more likely to move on to other pursuits that may be more acceptable to his peers (and possibly to you).

If none of these ideas make a difference, including ignoring his behavior and not reacting for a period of time, there's a chance that a serious condition could be at work. Excessive nose picking in public might be an indicator of Asperger's Disorder, a mild form of autism characterized by social isolation, eccentric interests and activities, and a general tendency to behave inappropriately around others. Consider reading Do I have Asperger's syndrome? from the Go Ask Alice! archives to learn more. If you're still concerned about your son's behavior, your health care provider is the next best resource.

Alice!
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