Do Security Blankets Belong in Preschool?
Mary Renck Jalongo

Jason toddles through the child care center solemnly sucking his thumb and clutching a piece of frayed fabric barely recognizable as a blanket. Anyone who touches the blanket is sure to get a demonstration of how much this 23-month-old treasures it. Early childhood educators are often confronted by preschoolers like Jason who cling to a square of cloth or a formerly fuzzy toy that has lost its appeal for everyone but the owner.

What is an attachment object?
Attachment is defined as a strong, enduring emotional bond and human beings form both social and non-social attachments. Social attachments involve other people and non-social attachments may be animate such as the family dog or inanimate such as a teddy bear. Treasured objects that become an inseparable part of a child’s daily life are one of the subcategory of non-social attachment objects.

How are these non-social attachments formed? Over a period of time, the young child invests certain objects with meaning; a blanket becomes associated not only with physical warmth and tactile comfort but also with being tucked in at night by a loving parent. Eventually, the child forms an emotional tie with the object itself.

Because non-social attachment objects evoke such feelings, they can reassure a child as s/he makes the move from complete dependence on a primary caregiver to growing independence. A blanket can figure prominently during important transitions – from home to school, for instance. Because of this characteristic, non-social attachment objects are also referred to as transitional objects. For many young children, blankets and soft toys become a way of easing the transition from a high arousal state to a low arousal state, which is why a security item becomes particularly important at nap or bedtime when young children use the object to help them move from wakefulness to sleep.

These items are a source of comfort to the young child. Early childhood educators are likely to have many dealings with attachment objects because these items enable children to carry a tangible reminder of home along with them to school.

How common is the use of attachment objects?
Nearly 50% of all children exhibit strong attachments to inanimate objects that are personal possessions. The most common attachment object is the security blanket; these objects usually become most important to children around 2 ½ -years of age.

Are attachment objects effective?
Infants, toddlers and preschoolers form a wide variety of both social and non-social attachments.

Newborns and infants
When a puppy or kitten that is brought home cries at night, a clock wrapped in a towel or blanket will usually console it. The ticking sound simulates a maternal heartbeat and the fabric gives some tactile stimulation. Classic research with young primates
also substantiates the importance of tactile comfort for mammals. When monkeys were reared with wire mesh and terry cloth-covered surrogate ‘mothers’, they clearly preferred the textured fabric even though the wire mesh surrogate was the source of food. If you visit a hospital nursery, you are likely to hear and see windup stuffed toys that simulate those sounds heard inside the womb by the fetus. The soft surface and familiar rhythmic noises effectively comfort many newborns. For some infants, this toy becomes their first non-social attachment object.

Pacifiers are another popular way of calming a mildly distressed infant. Sucking on a pacifier is surprisingly effective for subduing the majority of fussy babies. The use of pacifiers, particularly as children grow older, is undeniably controversial. Despite that fact, a pacifier often functions as a non-social attachment object.

**Toddlers**
Linus, the character from a well known cartoon strip, seems to have popularized the security blanket. In unfamiliar play settings, toddlers security blankets helped them to tolerate the novel situation longer than peers who had no such attachment to a blanket.

Research has shown that as children strive for greater autonomy, visual contact rather than direct physical contact often suffices. A toddler will use mother as home base by periodically looking across the room and smiling or returning to share a discovery. Both non-social attachment objects and simulations of social attachment objects can help children make important transitions. It also lends support to the practice of encouraging young children to bring photographs of their loved ones to school. These visual images may serve as useful reminders of social attachments and help young children cope with separation.

**When is emotional attachment to an object abnormal?**
Children are remarkably individual in their selection and use of attachment objects. Usually a transition object is soft and textured to provide tactile stimulation, like a security blanket ‘object’. It is also reasonably portable so that it can accompany the child.

Young children can become frantic when a security item is misplaced. In fact, a child’s distress over the loss of a treasured object can be so intense that some parents purchase a duplicate of the child’s attachment object to avoid this situation. But how can parents and teachers tell if the child has developed an unhealthy dependence on the object?

Actually, the method of determining when attachment to an object is abnormal is the same as that generally used to identify abnormal behavior. It includes:

*Duration* – Has the attachment to the object persisted far beyond the age at which most children would have begun to respond differently? A teenager might keep a toy from childhood on the shelf, for instance, but that is different from carrying it around everywhere.
Intensity – Is the child so involved with the object that it prevents her or him from functioning in a social way?

Emotional distress – Does the child appear to be generally troubled and struggling with a variety of problems?

How should teachers respond to children’s attachment objects?
Tolerance should characterize adults’ reactions to transitional objects. A policy that smiles on transitional objects says, in effect, “We know how it is when you’re two, three, four or five.” It must feel comforting to young children when a teacher welcomes the stuffed animals and blankets, and allows children access to them at any time.

Adults sometimes think that a child needs to be reminded that an old receiving blanket is for babies. It is precisely because a blanket is connected with babyhood that it is a source of comfort, especially during stressful situations. A child who attends a child care center for the first time often worries that peers will tease them about dragging along an old toy. Parents may also be embarrassed, both by the transition object’s appearance and by the implications that they have failed to persuade the child to act more grown up. But these situations call for an attitude that communicates child care professional’s acceptance of children and their companions. Disparaging comments will probably only intensify the child’s need to cling to whatever has been brought along and make the issue loom even larger in the parent’s mind. As the child grows in confidence and competence, the security object will lessen in importance.

Should adults encourage children to abandon non-social attachment objects?
Perceptive adults recognize opportunities for the child to deal with the object in a more mature way. If a child is playing with a doll and clinging to a blanket, the teacher might say ‘your baby looks like she is cold to me – maybe you should cover her up’. This suggestion encourages the child to detach from the object in a non threatening way.

Adults often worry that a child will still be carrying a teddy bear in fourth grade, but transition objects typically begin to lose their appeal without much adult intervention, often transition objects fade in importance because children find playmates and the object becomes more of a hindrance than a help.

What should be done about disputes over transition objects?
Usually a child’s security blanket or favorite toy is not particularly appealing as a play thing to other children. They may be curious about the object, however, and some owners react intensely to the slightest suggestion that it might be confiscated. Assurances that adults will intervene and prevent another child from taking a most prized possession should help to diminish the owner’s anxiety. A child should not be expected to share a security item, if necessary, the teacher should protect the child’s right to the security item. It is not too early for children to learn that some things are meant to be shared while others are not.

What about the potential for spreading disease?
Although a child’s attachment to a transition object should be accepted, a potential health hazard should not. Because these favorite objects are in such constant close
contact with the child, are dragged around on the floor and are usually constructed of some textured fabric, transition objects need frequent laundering and disinfecting. It may be difficult to determine whether the object is clean if it is bedraggled. Of course, the problems in preventing an attachment object from becoming a health hazard are compounded by the child’s unwillingness to surrender it, even for a short time. Allowing the child to participate in giving the object a bath is one satisfactory alternative. Ignoring the possibility that the child’s apparently harmless companion could also be transmitting infection is a serious oversight.

**Can’t other behavior problems be caused by attachment objects?**
Clinging to a security blanket and thumb sucking often go together. But the extinction of one behavior – such as taking the child’s blanket away – will usually increase the other. It may also result in less desirable behavior such as loud protests and displays of aggression. A child who runs out of the classroom might be going to check on the attachment object that has been stored in a cubby against her wishes. Perhaps the child worries that if an object can be taken away temporarily, it can just as easily be taken away altogether.

The attachment object should not be blamed for the unacceptable behavior. Rather, it is the adults who demands that children abandon attachment objects prematurely who compounds the problem. Attachment objects should be handled with the same sensitivity as a child’s fears. In fact, these objects sometimes appear to be young children’s way of dealing with their most fundamental fear – the fear of abandonment by their parents.

**What if a prospective kindergartner still has an attachment to a blanket or toy?**
Even though the problem of what to do with an attachment object might seem insignificant to an adult, it can be an authentic crisis from the child’s perspective. A child may worry that peers will ridicule the habit of sleeping with a teddy bear.

Attachments to inanimate objects that are not highly prized by others is common among adults too. Usually it is the sentimental value rather than the market value of a wedding band that would cause someone to mourn its loss. Insisting that a child abruptly abandon a loyal transition object is insensitive. Parents and teachers are much more successful with a gradual approach. Usually these non-social attachment objects are most important at bedtime, so children can be encouraged to use them less and less often, finally reserving them for the few minutes before sleep. When young children are first learning to relate emotionally, they need acceptance and understanding. Delivering ultimatums or harsh criticisms will only make matters worse.

Non-social attachment objects can and do play an important role in the lives of young children. Understanding how blankets, teddy bears, bottles or other security items contribute to preschoolers’ lives can help parents and teachers nurture the emotional development of young children.