



gretchen's
house

So you want to know more about...

Comfort Objects

Where is the love(y)?

The fierce, passionate attachment children have to their lovies or **comfort objects** is not a sign of neediness, but **security** (hence the term, *security blanket*). The object provides the child with a means to soothe him or herself. A lovey can become a stand-in for a parent or caregiver, and it functions as a constant in a seemingly ever-changing world.

Infants and toddlers first learn how to soothe themselves with an object, then translate that skill to other behaviors without the object. Comfort objects aren't **crutches** unless they eliminate the possibility of other kinds of coping. That's usually not true until kids have language and some social skills, which develop between 3-5 years of age. Even then, they may need

to use a comfort object from time to time.

Young children are very concrete thinkers, and having an object they can take into the world with them is a physical reminder that they will go "home" again, meaning both the place and the people who live there. Sometimes children choose comfort objects based on **touch**: a silky binding or fleecy fabric is soothing to finger and stroke. Sometimes **smell** is the most important factor, which explains why children tend to freak out when we wash their lovies. Other times, children associate an object with a favorite experience. Some children don't need an object to cuddle, just a favorite picture to look at.

Not all children will take a comfort object. But for those who do, it's helpful if parents and caregivers can both respect the attachment and set some boundaries to ensure it stays safe and doesn't become an obstacle for social relations. Comfort objects are most helpful when children are going through or a transition or trying to relax. If adults set them up on a table or shelf when children are comfortable, it will help keep the object clean and safe. As children get older, you can set limits such as "only for sleeping time" or drop-off with a caregiver. With pacifiers, the sensation of sucking them can lead kids to keep them in long after a stressful moment has passed, so adults may need to put them out of sight and create distractions.

Lovey 911—Dealing with Disasters

Your child vomits/urinates/spills something on his comfort object. Give your child and the object a bath together, or have him put it in the washer and dryer. Offer a substitute, "special occasion" lovey or other privilege. (Procure a spare pronto if you haven't already!)

The comfort object disappears. Have your child help you look for it. Ask around at places it might have been left behind, post signs in the neighborhood, whatever. Help your child feel powerful, and reassure him or her that

you would look long and hard for them if they went missing, because with kids, it's all about them! If you have no luck, find a suitable substitute or graduate to something more age-appropriate if it was time to move on, anyway.

You and your child's caregiver disagree about how much your child needs the item. Kids often have very different needs at home and school. The deciding factor should be what's best for the child. Compromise about specific situations and time limits.

Further reading

- ▶ *Knuffle Bunny*
by Mo Willems
- ▶ *The Red Blanket*
by Eliza Thomas
- ▶ *Benny and the Binky*
by Barbro Lindgren
- ▶ *Binky and Blankie*
both by Leslie Patricelli

Ages and Stages — Appropriate Expectations

6—9 months: Some babies this young will show a preference for a particular blanket or stuffed animal.

Objects that smell like parents or home are especially comforting. If you see a preference, buy a duplicate!

12-18 months: Fingering a favorite blanket, sucking a thumb or pacifier, or cuddling a beloved toy are healthy ways for young children to soothe themselves when upset, anxious, or tired.

18-36 months: Children want to feel “big” and powerful. Many will phase out their comfort objects as they acquire speech and other tools for getting their needs met. It’s a good time to start setting reasonable limits on the use of comfort objects — only for a few minutes at drop-off, then keeping them at home, and eventually limiting them to upset situations or bedtime.

3-5 years: Comfort objects used in public can become a barrier to interaction with other children. It’s perfectly normal for children to still feel attachment to toys and blankets and want to include them in their day (a tea

party or naptime for example), as long as the child is usually able to cope with frustration with other means. If a child regresses due to a family or life transition, small doses of comfort object time are an appropriate bridge. Spending a little time with a teddy or blanket can help a child feel secure enough to face the new challenge. Don’t restart pacifiers or bottles once the habit is extinguished, however. This infantilizes the child and can make him or her feel less capable rather than boosting their confidence. Parents can help children create a special place to keep their lovey safe at home. Sometimes, a corner of a favorite blanket sewn into a coat sleeve or tucked in a pocket can be a great help to a child who believes he or she can’t live without it. Just remember that any time a comfort object leaves the house, it can go missing. This grows more likely as children become more independent and play more places with more people because there are so many more distractions.

Isn’t he a little old for that?

Sometimes people make judgmental remarks about comfort objects that are well-intentioned, but other times they’re just thinly veiled insults. Although it’s easy to feel criticized and defensive, it’s important to remember that the important person in the scenario is your child. If you have considered his or her emotional needs and you believe the blanket, pacifier, or stuffed animal is meeting those needs without impeding other kinds of growth, you should let this kind of remark go in one ear and out the other. It is not a sign of immaturity or neediness to have a strong attachment to a comfort object; rather, it can be a sign of increased self-sufficiency. A child who can

comfort his or herself is in good shape to deal with the inevitable bumps and disappointments of day-to-day life.

There are times, however, when these remarks sting because they are true. Ask yourself if the child really needs the object or if it’s merely convenient for you. A pacifier is an obstacle for a toddler or preschooler trying to verbalize his or her needs. If you think your child might be able to reduce lovey time or forego the object altogether, make a plan to help him or her shift to more developmentally appropriate coping tools.

Frequently Asked Questions

I want my child’s lovey to go into cold storage, for good. What’s the best way to do this? With young children, a gradual transition (two weeks, perhaps) can help wean them. With verbal children, explain your reasons and ask the child for ideas. Some kids give their loveys to a younger sibling or needy child. Others prefer to create a safe storage spot where the item will be preserved in case of dire emergency. Take a photo of your child with the object. Give your child a “big kid” object or privilege in exchange for their “sacrifice.” If you do something ceremonial, make it productive rather than destructive, and avoid melodrama. Kids take their cues about coping from adults. Without dismissing the loss, show them that they can move on.

I want my child to have access to his/her comfort object throughout the day. Teachers determine access based on individual children’s development and classroom situations. It’s not practical to allow a toddler to drag a blanket to the painting easel or playground, for example. The blanket would get dirty and interfere with play. Sometimes children need the pacifier or object less when they’re at the center because there are other distractions and attachments. Teachers want children to be comfortable, too. We won’t deprive a child who’s suffering of the only thing that can soothe him or her, but we will certainly try other appropriate means to comfort children as we help them move towards security and independence.