

Security Blankets

A child who clings to a blanket or remnant of cloth, a diaper, teddy bear or toy — no matter how threadbare and unsightly — is a child who is balancing the need for security with another need: independence.

A child uses his “security friend” to soothe himself the way his parents used to soothe him as an infant. Only this time, it’s the child who’s doing the holding. The child is in control. This is a good sign.

Remember, most children drop their psychological dependence on the security friend long before kindergarten. You can help just by understanding why that “blankie” or “cuddles” is so important to your child.

Why a security blanket?

Child development experts say they can find no difference in the psychological makeup of people who had — or did not have — a security friend in childhood.

If a child is going to adopt such a friend, it’s most likely to happen between the ages of 15 and 18 months. It’s no coincidence that this is when the child is beginning to separate emotionally from his parents. Some children develop an intense dependence on the security friend that lasts for years. Others have temporary attachments, or drift in and out.

Children can release their feelings of anger, fear and guilt more easily by acting than by speaking. Holding a security friend and stroking it gives your child an acceptable way to express emotions on her own level. Many children combine this with rhythmic activity, such as rocking on all fours or bumping their heads against the crib. This re-creates the rhythmic soothing of infancy when their parents rocked them or walked with them.

Some parents feel hurt when their child gets overly attached to a security blanket or other comforting item. Aren’t the parents’ hugs, kisses and pats enough to make the child feel secure? Yes, but the security device is for more than just comfort. Besides conjuring up the warm, good feelings of security in infancy, your child is using it as an anchor as he launches into ever-increasing adventures in the world.

Feelings of safety and security are among a child’s most basic needs. In fact, these needs often rank above even food and water. Many behavior problems stem from a feeling of insecurity. Even 1- and 2-year-olds feel these changes and sensations. But, they also are developing a sense of autonomy. They don’t necessarily want to depend on anyone else to meet their needs all the time. That’s why loving and accepting parents and a stable home environment might not be enough. Many of them also depend on a security friend.

Children tend to rely more on their security friends at stressful times, such as the start of a vacation. When your child faces such a time, make sure the security friend is available and have a backup in case the first friend gets lost. A big family change, such as divorce, death or illness, may trigger regression to a security friend that you thought your child had outgrown.

The child gets touchable comfort. Many children stroke or pat the security friend much in the way an infant strokes his mother’s clothing while nursing. But more than that, they gain the precious comfort of knowing that the security device is going to be there for them, whenever they need it.

Coping with your child’s security blanket

It’s normal to worry about your child’s intense relationship with a security friend. Some common fears about security friends include:

- **They tend to look disreputable and you can’t easily clean them.** Either the child won’t part with it long enough for you to clean it, or it isn’t the type of item that is easily washed. The child may be “hooked” on the security friend’s smell, and washing it destroys that. When given the choice between a clean security friend or no security friend, your child will often begrudgingly accept the cleaner version of their item. This should be done in a matter of fact way, without much discussion, and with no debate. Remember, many serious viruses can live on soft items for hours and on some hard surfaces for days. Sometimes parents get sick of how bad the comfort device looks and offer the child a brand-new one just like it. Because it’s the item’s familiarity that’s appealing, this technique rarely works. You may want to have two from the start and alternate.
- **If it gets lost, you fear your child will never sleep again.** Some families insist that the child leave the security friend in her room and never take it anywhere, so it will never get lost. If that’s impractical, just be vigilant. Another tactic is to introduce a “new” friend and suggest that your child sleep with both. Don’t force the introduction; do it in a matter-of-fact way. This allows for a gradual transfer of affection to the new friend and more flexibility.
- **Your child combines the comfort of a security blanket with other annoying or potentially harmful habits.** If you notice that holding the security friend tends to trigger undesirable habits,

Security Blankets (continued)

such as thumbsucking or hair-twirling, divert your child's attention with a toy during these times. Point out this connection to your child, to help her avoid these behaviors in the future.

- **Your child will drag that bedraggled teddy bear all through school and embarrass you.** Never be ashamed: A security friend is a symbol of your child's adaptability. Most children outgrow their dependence on a security friend between ages 2 and 5, but some cling longer. One mother bought an inexpensive teddy bear pin for her daughter's first day of school. She told the girl that if she started to want her real bear, she could just stroke the tiny pin on her shirt. By the third day, the child adjusted so well that she didn't even ask to wear the pin and she didn't miss the bear at all. It isn't a good idea to try to take the item away from your child. Just remind him occasionally, in an encouraging tone, that someday he'll be a big boy and won't need it anymore. Often, the old blanket or toy will remain in the child's room for years as a decoration. That's fine. Older children can seek their old friend out during stressful times for a little cuddling.