Transitional Objects

The relationships between toddlers and their favorite objects are more like relationships between two people than between person and “thing.” Toddlers form strong attachments to their “loveys,” and have intense feelings and may howl in protest when their special item can’t be found. Though this can be stressful for parents and caregivers, it is behavior that is quite common and to be expected. It is important that these “relationships” between toddlers and comfort objects be supported. It can help a child feel secure and offer him a tool to rely on while he learns to calm himself.

These loveys and blankets often find themselves left behind as the child grows more active and comfortable in the world. Luckily, this often happens around the time a child starts kindergarten, where loveys may be discouraged.

Until then, here are some parent hacks when it comes to loveys:

- **Get a spare.** If your child becomes attached to a particular object, go ahead and try to find a second (or third) and rotate them. Tuck the extras away, and then you can wash one while the other is available. Some people think ahead when a child first becomes attached to a blanket and use their sewing skills to cut it in half for rotation purposes.

- **Clean their lovey on the sly.** If you don’t have multiple or spare loveys, you might have to be creative about a washing schedule. Sometimes children get attached to stuffed animals that are not machine washable. Use a damp cloth to spot clean these types of objects, perhaps airing them out in the sunshine occasionally.

- **Find an alternative if you don’t have a spare.** If your child has a one-and-only lovey, you may end up in a pinch. When this is the case, find an acceptable substitute for your child. Perhaps an article of clothing worn by mom would be an acceptable substitute.

- **Listen to your child’s upset feelings.** Your child may have a meltdown if the lovey is missing or it’s time to take a break from it. Oftentimes the outpouring of emotion just needs a listening ear. Acknowledge the loss (“You are really worried because we can’t find Bear.”).

- **If the lovey is truly gone, wait a bit before replacing.** Observe whether your child is able to function without the lovey. If she is not ready yet, ask her if she’d like to choose another. Make it a special ritual of selecting a new stuffed animal or lovey. Use the lovely during daily routines and separations to help your child transfer a sense of security to this new object.

Here’s the thing about loveys—they can be both a blessing and a curse. These special objects can ease anxiety during transitions like morning drop-off at child care, but if they are lost or misplaced, the child’s meltdowns can be intense. Rest assured that somewhere between 2 and 5 years old, your child will probably give up the comfort object. But don’t be surprised if he turns back to it in times of stress—even in his teen years!