

Creating a Network of People Who Work with Infants and Toddlers



Caring for the Little Ones

by Karen Miller

Transitional Objects: A Little Comfort From Home

Dear Reader,

I mentioned home visits in this article. Does anyone do this anymore, on a systematic basis? I'd like to devote a whole article to this in the future.

Please share with me:

- How do you structure home visits to get the greatest benefit?
- What do you see as the goals of the visit?
- How do you handle the pay issue for the visiting employee?
- What do you see as the various benefits?
- How about some hints for success?

I'd like to hear from parents who have been visited as well. If you used to do home visits and discontinued the practice for one reason or another, tell me about it. Simply contact me about this or any other issue at the e-mail address listed at the end of the article.

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Karen Miller".

Little Marjorie clutches her special dolly close to her as she faces the new day in your program. You can almost see her draw strength and courage out of that piece of cotton and polyester fiberfill. You get a frantic call from parents at 8:30 pm. Jamal left his "blankie" at the center and he can't possibly go to sleep without it. Theodore, who has been playing busily all morning, suddenly panics when he realizes he is out of arm's reach of his bear. Calm is restored when you tell him it is in his cubby and he can get it if he needs it. These are all common scenarios for people who work with older infants and toddlers.

Transitional objects seem to take hold at the end of the infant year, when children are starting to walk and have two hands free for hauling things while they explore. These objects take on all different forms. Often it is the classic blanket, sometimes worn to shreds. Or it might be a stuffed animal or doll, threadbare from so much loving. Sometimes the object carries with it a particular smell, comforting to the child, dubious to the rest of us, and the toddler allows the object to be washed only after much cajoling and reassuring. The interesting thing is that nobody taught the child to use this object in this way. It seems to echo some basic instinct. Other primate

babies hang on to mother and ride around on her back for much of their childhood. A blanket or stuffed animal is a piece of home — a symbol of mother — for the child to carry with her as she faces the wider world. This is one of the first symbols the child is able to use.

We all know that these security objects are important and go a long way toward making a child feel comfortable in a new situation, but sometimes these special "lovies" are difficult to keep track of. A child can become very possessive and upset when another child touches or attempts to play with it. However, other children will often understand when you say something like: "This is Sasha's special toy. She uses it to make herself feel better, just like you do with your blankie."

Some children are content simply to have the object in their cubby where they can get at it if they need it. Others literally panic if their object is out of sight. This extreme dependence is usually temporary. As the child starts to feel more secure and adventurous, the blanket will be laid aside briefly. You can help the child put it in his cubby where it will often remain for most of the day, only to be brought out at nap time. Eventually these special objects are

brought out only at nap time. Some programs, remaining flexible, generally discourage children from bringing blankets outside on the playground or to the lunch table.

Helen Oxenbury's toddler picture books about a little boy named Tom and his security object, a monkey doll named "Pippo," give many examples of how a child plays with a special toy like this. *A New Friend for Pippo* describes Tom's feelings when another child wants to play with Pippo. And *Pippo and the Washing Machine* will find recognition with your toddlers. Both are published by Aladdin Books, a division of Macmillan Publishing Company.

Some programs work toward having the child leave a special object at the child care program all the time, retrieving it mainly at nap time when it seems to be most necessary. This gives the parent one less thing to find and pack in the morning.

One caregiver told about a new child whose mother brought both a teddy bear and a special blanket for the child to have at nap time. The child wasn't interested in either but was having a hard time settling down to sleep. The caregiver remembered that the child particularly liked a certain ball and had played with it much of the morning. She offered to let him nap with it. She said it was touching the way he wrapped his arms around the ball and drifted off to sleep. For him, the ball was not so much a symbol of home as a symbol of the idea that "somebody here cares about me and wants to make me happy."

Pacifiers can be a little more difficult to deal with. Children seem to have a stronger emotional attachment to them, or maybe it is just the habit which is hard for some children to break. These are hygiene concerns, and, of course, pacifiers inhibit expressive language. Of

course, you write the child's name on the pacifier and dip it in a bleach solution from time to time. It is good to encourage the child to put it in her cubby for when she really needs it, but not go around with it all day.

Laurene Ellmers Phillips, owner of the Elm Tree Toddler Center in Boulder, Colorado, has had some success telling children to sit down in a particular place when they need to use their pacifiers. She is giving the children permission to use them but has them "dedicate time" to it. Pretty soon it becomes boring, just sitting there sucking. She stresses that she is very flexible about this and if the child really needs it, he can carry it with him. She has also encouraged a child to keep the needed pacifier in his pocket while playing. Again, this gives the child the security of knowing it is there but keeps it out of the way when hands are busy. The parents cooperate by having the child wear clothing with convenient pockets. Good idea!

One related idea is tape recorded "love stories." Invite the parent to talk to the child in loving ways on a tape cassette, or read a favorite story, or sing a lullaby. Allow the child to listen when she is missing her parent.

Consider becoming a transitional object yourself, familiar in both the child care environment and in the child's home. In other words, make a home visit — or several — if you can. When a child has seen you at his home where he is comfortable and secure, you can more easily become his anchor — his starting point in a new environment. At the very least, send a nice, smiling picture of you home with the child, to be posted in the home environment.

As we think about ways to bridge the gap between home and school, let's also think about ways to bridge the gap the other way. Allow the child to take a lit-

tle piece of you or your program home with him. Some programs have developed systems that allow parents to check out a toy overnight.

When you think about it, adults have transitional objects, too — things from home that we take with us into the wider world. College girls typically have a room full of stuffed animals as if to keep in touch with the safe world of the child inside. Think of the family photos we carry with us or put up in our work environments. Luggage stores often sell stuffed animals for customers to take along on their business travels for companionship in lonely hotel rooms. We are not beyond wanting a little piece of home to comfort and anchor us.

Karen Miller is the author of (among other titles) *Simple Steps: Developmental Activities for Infants, Toddlers and Twos* and the newly revised version of *Things to Do With Toddlers and Twos*.

Send comments, questions, feedback, giggles, and good ideas — as well as any photos you'd like to share with other readers — to Karen Miller, PO Box 97, Cowdrey, CO 80434-0097 (karenmiller2@compuserve.com).