

MIND in the Making

The Seven Essential Life Skills Every Child Needs

PRESCRIPTIONS FOR LEARNING

Security Blankets and Other “Lovies”

Promoting the Life Skill of Taking on Challenges in Toddlers

Five Strategies that Work in Moving Move from Managing Children’s Behavior to Promoting Life

Question: My 18 month old wants to bring his blanket with him everywhere we go. It feels like he can’t manage without it. Should I make him leave it at home or even get rid of it all together?

According to the American Academy of Pediatrics, security objects like blankets, stuffed animals, toys or a piece of clothing are called transitional objects because they help children make the emotional transition in somewhat new situations or with new people or at transition times like bedtime. These objects feel good and give children a sense of familiarity and safety.

Transitional objects are not a sign of weakness or insecurity, and there’s no reason to keep your child from using one. In fact, it is a sign that your child is learning ways to use self control to cope with stress and challenges on his own.

Jerome Kagan of Harvard University says, “The behavior you see in a child is like observing the sky without a telescope. You just see a little. You’ve got to peer deeper.”

- 1. Play detective.** See if you can understand what your child is trying to tell you with his behavior. Once you begin to see the reason behind your child’s need for his blanket, you can begin to help him eventually learn to manage on his own.
 - Does the blanket seem to help your child when he goes to new places or meets new people?
 - Is there a particular time that your child seems to need his blanket the most, like before naptime or bedtime or when traveling?

Once you have more of an understanding of your child’s feelings and actions, you can help him build his confidence and his ability to take on challenges.

- 2. Acknowledge your child’s feelings.** When your child feels supported and understood, he is more likely to try things, even when they are hard. Show your confidence in your child’s ability to take on challenges on his own by recognizing how he may be feeling:
 - “It is okay to feel sad or scared when you go to this new place. When you use your blanket, it helps you feel better.”

If there are times when he can’t take his blanket, let him know that you are there for him:

- “I know it is hard to be without your blanket. It makes you feel safe and warm. But I am here to help you.”

T. Berry Brazelton of the Harvard Medical School says:

Every time babies put themselves together in the face of stress or stimulation, they’re getting internal feedback that says, ‘You learned. You just did it!’ And if they do it over and over, it becomes part of their equipment. When the adult reinforces these internal feedback systems, but doesn’t take them over, we are giving that baby not only the chance to learn, but also a chance to experience the excitement of learning.

- 3. Celebrate your toddler’s successes.** One way to help your child build his confidence and his ability to take on challenges is to praise his efforts and problem-solving strategies. Acknowledge your child’s tries at managing his stress

on his own. You can say things like:

- “You took your nap without your blanket! I knew you could do it!”
- “When we were in the thunderstorm, you held my hand. I think that helped you feel safe.”

A review on stress and children by the National Scientific Council on the Developing Child, based at Harvard University, states that the stresses caused by everyday challenges like “meeting new people, dealing with frustration, getting an immunization, and overcoming a fear of animals” are positive as long as the child has the support to master these situations. Learning to adjust to this kind of experience, they write, is “an essential feature of healthy development.”

4. Support your child in developing coping strategies. You can help your child develop new ways to deal with stresses, while still allowing him to use his blanket. Eventually these coping strategies will take the place of your child’s comfort object.

- Share with your child how you deal with stress: “Sometimes after a long day, I like to relax and read a book.” Your child watches you to learn how to respond to difficult situations.
- Another way of helping children learn to cope is to let them know whom to turn to for help. Remind your child: “When you are feeling sad or scared or nervous, you can always ask me for a hug or find a special grownup to help you.”
- Use calming techniques like singing songs, telling stories or taking deep breaths. Help your child remember to use these strategies when he feels stressed.

5. Be patient. Your child will most likely let you know when he is ready to give up his blanket. Insisting that he give it up before he is ready will make things harder for both of you. If you worry that your child is overly dependent on a blanket, stuffed animal or other item, Mary Renck Jalongo of Indiana University of Pennsylvania suggests that you consider the following:

- Duration—Has the attachment to this object lasted longer than the age when most children move away from these items?
- Intensity—Is your child so involved with this item that it takes away from his learning or his ability to be with other children?
- Emotions—Is your child feeling stressed or struggling with something that you need to address directly?

Look closely to discover the source of any stress or anxiety for your child. Do not make negative comments to your child about using his blanket. He is working on learning how to Take on Challenges on his own and needs your support.

By five or six, most children have moved on from these objects. If you need help dealing with the situation, you can ask a teacher or other professional for guidance.

These five strategies will promote the life skill of Taking on Challenges and move from managing children’s behavior to promoting life skills in fun and doable ways.

Taking on Challenges: Life is full of stresses and challenges. Children who are willing to take on challenges (instead of avoiding them or simply coping with them) do better in school and in life.

Mind in the Making (MITM), at The Bezos Family Foundation, is an unprecedented effort to share the science of children’s learning with the general public, families and professionals who work with them. Based on *Mind in the Making: The Seven Essential Life Skills Every Child Needs* (HarperCollins, 2010) by Ellen Galinsky, Chief Science Officer at The Bezos Family Foundation, its mission is to promote Executive Function life skills in adults and through them in children in order to keep the fire for learning burning brightly in all of us.

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