

# Dimensions of Early Childhood

Volume 46,  
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Transitional Objects in an  
Early Childhood Classroom  
for Children and Teachers**

**La Importancia de los  
Objetos de Transición  
para los Niños y los Maestros de una  
Clase de Primera Infancia**

**Nutrition Research and Policy:  
Implications for Best Practices  
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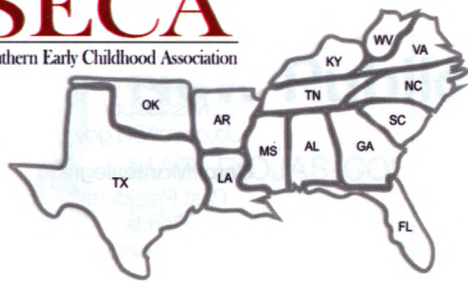
**The Brain Body Connection:  
Advocating Physical Activity  
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**The Power to ROAR:  
Reaching Out to All Readers  
by Using Shared Storybook  
Reading to Cultivate Self-Efficacy  
and Social-Emotional Growth**



# SECA

Southern Early Childhood Association



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# The Significance of Transitional Objects in an Early Childhood Classroom for Children and Teachers

BY COLLEEN GODDARD



When I first began to teach children 18 months to five years of age, I did not know what a transitional object truly was. I did recall, however, that my own son possessed a soft, tattered stuffed dog, with one ear missing, and a scratched marble eye. This dog's name was Muffy and my son carried Muffy close to him from toddlerhood to kindergarten. Muffy had a chair at the family dining table, a pillow to sit against on the couch, and a place in my son's arms at every social gathering – held, hugged, clutched and carried. Muffy was an instrumental part of my son's daily life, and upon my son's start of school, Muffy remained at home and "waited" for my son to return.

Upon my son's return, he and Muffy reunited daily in fierceness and fortitude, joy and happiness, and relief in the reunion. Until that one day when Muffy was not immediately retrieved or sought after, as my son had brought a friend home from school. Instead, Muffy was relegated to limbo, sitting in the threshold (both literally and metaphorically)

until my son's friend departed. After this social visit, Muffy became permanently positioned in the periphery, as further encounters between my son and his friends would ensue. Sometimes my son's friends would bring their own special toys from home, those objects that were meaningful to them, and Muffy would resurface. These objects, like Muffy, were held, hugged and hoisted in the air until finally one day they were ignored. Forgotten by the immediacy of the need to be used as an intimate security object, and instead these special objects (toys from home – transitional objects like Muffy), were used as signifying emotional self-regulation and social interconnectivity while also instilling a sense of identity and individuation for both my son and his friends.

As I reflect on my own son's experience, I realize that I had witnessed the use of a transitional object by my child as both an emotional stabilizer as well as a social connector. However, I did not fully comprehend the profound importance with regards

to signifying his development, until years later. As an early childhood educator, child development specialist, and professor of education, I explore transitional phenomena and object relations – examining both the use and accompanying meaning and significance of transitional objects at the beginning and end of life. In addition to my research, I have been privileged to observe teachers at work, in classrooms and early childhood centers, dedicated to celebrating the presence of transitional objects. These objects are used to ease the separation/attachment process at the beginning of the school year.

Transitional objects are items of attachment that are used to support social relatedness and evoke empathy as a child connects with the objects of others in very deep and meaningful ways. These objects are both representational of home and relational in terms of the role they play in social engagements, school experiences, and throughout the course of a child's overall development. Many of the theories presented in this article are seminal pieces that educators may use in their philosophical understanding of transitional objects.

## The Psychology of Transitional Objects

The term transitional object was introduced in 1951 by British pediatrician, child psychiatrist and psychoanalyst D.W. Winnicott (1971) as:

A designation for any material to which an infant attributes a special value and by means of which the child is able to make the necessary shift from the earliest oral relationship with mother to genuine object-relationships procured by the self (p. 64).

According to the Argentine psychoanalyst Horacio Etchegoyen (as cited in Brenner, 2004, p. 7), a transitional object is a "relationship object," a "relational way of being with

an object,” which “originates in our earliest relationship, in the sensitive attunement of mother to child” (Viorst, 1986, pg. 51).

A transitional object provides an understanding of human development commencing with infancy and early childhood. Transitional objects are self-chosen, a child's first “not-me possession” like a blanket, teddy bear, pacifier, or doll. The reliance on such objects is rooted in sensorial elements that lessen the stress of separation, while they soothe and comfort the child. Transitional objects for a child according to Winnicott (1971) are marked by specific attributes.

Brenner (2004) states the following:

The child assumes all rights over the object, the object is freely loved, the object must never be changed unless by the child, the object survives loving, hating and any aggression the child might show it, the object gives warmth that imbues a personality or reality of its own and the object's fate must be gradually allowed to be disregarded, so that in the years ahead it becomes not so much forgotten as relegated to limbo and thereby allows for transition (p. 5).

The essential structure of transitional objects, the essence of this phenomenon, may then be considered descriptive of the aforementioned theory; but also defined via the personification and representations of the object in altered states – as these external objects activate memories from within which may act as an internal compass for navigating life transitions. Winnicott (1971) states that this perpetual motion of transition may include an “inner reality to that individual, an inner world that can be rich or poor and can be at peace or in a state of war...” (p. 64).

### How Children Experience Transitional Objects

Transitional objects theoretically rooted in infancy and early childhood provide comfort and security, as they become the replacement for as well as a representation of, the maternal/paternal bond. They provide for and act as emotional and psychological stabilizers. Transitional objects symbolize home, the maternal/paternal bond and all things familiar such as smells, sounds, and textures that hold deep meaning and provide great comfort. Transitional objects are internalized as a multi-sensory

experience, as well as deeply embedded in the psyche. These objects are often tangible and concrete and composed of relational characteristics, resonant of Charles Schulz's character Linus, from the comic strip *Peanuts* and his beloved blanket.

A transitional object allows for a child to cope alone, and apart from the mother and father, but at the same time, become part of the larger, social world. As a child moves away from their parent/caregiver and is able to self-comfort and self-soothe as well as socialize with their transitional object a child experiences a sense of self-assuredness, independence and autonomy. The relationship between a young child and their transitional object may be experienced as meaningful as an interpersonal relationship between two people. This speaks to the need for the child to be able to see, touch, feel, hold, cuddle with, suck on, pull at, detach from, revisit and reconnect with the object of attachment, whenever a transition occurs.

Transitional objects are often experienced by children as security objects that orient the child through the separation process at the start of school. These objects are a fundamental representation of the self and when shared, the object becomes an interlocutor for meaningful interactions and social/emotional connections.

According to Dr. Laura Kamptner, Professor and Director of The Parenting Center, Institute of Child Development and Family Relations in San Bernardino, California, the author of *Transitional Objects, Helpful for Parents, Too?* “the transitional object becomes a representation of the bond with the mother, reflective of the child's inner world (the actual attachment with mother) and the outer world (the reality of having to cope without and separate from mother)” (Kamptner, 1991, 1994, p. 1).

Transitions are changes that occur throughout the course of our lives. Changes that move us from one stage of development to another, including but not limited to beginning school, graduating from school, getting married, moving from one home to another, even experiencing separation, loss and death. Some of the transitions that children experience involve birth itself, as well as transitioning from the breast to the bottle, crawling to walking, being fed to feeding themselves, crib to bed, diapers to being toilet trained, and going to school. All of these transitions present children with

challenges and struggles, uncertainty and unpredictability. However, the experience of moving through these development milestones with a transitional object in hand, affords a child the opportunity to utilize their transitional object in deep and meaningful ways, while the use of the object itself is also synonymously affirmed and supported by the adults in a child's life.

As I continued to reflect on my experience regarding the importance of transitional objects for my own son, I have also contemplated the significance of transitional objects not only for the children who actively procure and use them. More importantly, how early childhood educators support the use of these objects in meaningful ways both theoretically and practically in their classrooms.

### Transitional Objects with Parents and Teachers

In the earliest of preschool classrooms, transitions are experienced over and over. A parent says goodbye and the child responds in a cathartic release of emotion. It is in these moments where the healing power of transitional objects is fully realized. A Mother offers her son an old t-shirt she has worn, a Father shares a handkerchief from his pocket with his daughter, and the sensorial elements calm and support this child through the good-bye, as the child metaphorically and literally holds on to the promise of their parent's return.

Transitional objects serve numerous functions for children, they provide not only a memory and a measure of security, but also a sense of autonomy and ownership, as the child enjoys having authority over his or her own personalized and intimate object. In addition, the ways in which children use transitional objects in moments of stress, change, separation and transition, supported by early childhood educators, affords children an opportunity to acquire coping skills that may not otherwise be possible. In fact, learning how to use a transitional object in deep and meaningful ways ensures emotional maturation and autonomous functioning when encouraged by teachers and families.

Once school begins, however, many families share that their child is “perfectly fine” and doesn't “need” anything, and in some situations, transitional objects are hidden in cubbies, or backpacks by parents. In my numerous years of teaching, I have



been amazed by those children who apparently did not “need” anything [a transitional object] were actively procuring and utilizing self-chosen objects that they had discovered in the classroom. For example, if Mom had left her scarf unintentionally, it became a security blanket. Other children would carry pillows or stuffed animals they discovered in the classroom and hold on to them tenaciously until the parent returned. The transitional item would be flung in the air as the children ran to their mother or father upon their return.

This particular response gives way to the debatable aspects of the use of transitional objects. Why are transitional objects often perceived as socially unacceptable, and/or restricted to certain times and places? If taken in context as an instrumental component of child development – if the object thought to make one stronger and more resilient is refuted, removed or denied – it could actually create more anxiety and discourse. In addition, the usage, availability and consideration of such objects actually enhance emotional and social connectedness between child-teacher relationships and amongst the children themselves.

In one of my daily visits at the school where I work, I was delighted by the number of stuffed animals, rag dolls and teddy bears that were abundantly present and harmoniously integrated into the work and play of the children in the 4-year-old room. In a classroom where early educators might

expect objects of attachment to be mandated to bedrooms, back packs and family travels, I witnessed the integration of these beloved objects in numerous ways and in a variety of areas in the room.

I observed one child clutching her beloved toy dog while reading a book to her friend – both she and her dog were actively turning the pages – and with every page turned, she looked down at her dog, lovingly and with great appreciation and gratitude for his apparent contribution and cooperation. Another child was squishing, squeezing and stuffing his Snoopy inside a wooden block and alternatively opening the refrigerator door so his dear dog could “chill out”. I was struck by the level of self-awareness this particular child had for his own self-regulatory needs and how to meet them. On the rug, two children were constructing a magna tile rooftop for two animals – one floppy ear extended carefully up and out of the construction while a rainbow-colored bear covered in band-aids was laying on top. These children were deep in conversation about their “hospital” and how their loved creatures would get better. Across the room, sitting on the floor in front of her cubby, a young girl was combing her fingers through her raggedy doll’s hair, another child was sitting with her oversized gingerbread doll, holding a phone to her ear, and placing one next to her doll, as she nodded in agreement that Mommy would come back after lunch. Another child was sitting in the dramatic

play kitchen, feeding and clothing her bear holding it close to her heart.

These children were utilizing and integrating transitional objects into their work and play – self chosen, personified instruments of self expression that were synonymously supported, acknowledged and honored by their teachers. These transitional objects were being used not merely as security objects for the children to cling to and hold on to, but more importantly and distinctly, as tools for social interaction, rich in emotional nuance and the psychological comfort of ‘home’ coming to school.

### How Educators can Support the Use of Transitional Objects in the Early Childhood Classroom

In the earliest of childhood classrooms, separations and attachments, as well as reunions, are experienced every day. This can be met with great uncertainty and discord. A child’s transitional object lessens the eruptive tension, the discomfort and doubt. The child’s transitional object offers certainty, security, comfort and solace. Especially when this very particular and intimate object is regarded in its importance, with deep respect and with great acceptance. The use of a transitional object should not be associated with shame or guilt, or any form of judgment. Educators should encourage parents not to insist that their child give up their transitional object, but rather advocate for its use in different ways. By doing so, educators work in partnership with parents to encourage a child’s emotional and social development, rooted in deeply meaningful peer-based interactions, wherein the attachment to the transitional object will shift in its usage, although certainly not in its importance.

The use of transitional objects should not be used in context of a punishment or reward, even as educators can set limits for how and when the object is used if the object distracts the child or others. At this point, the object is no longer fully internalized as an autonomous tool and has taken on a different purpose wherein the reallocation of the object may prove necessary. If the object is lost, educators should acknowledge the loss and allow the child to talk about it. Allow the child to choose another one if requested, but realize the object was/is deeply loved by the child.

## Transitional Objects and Child Development

I believe that a great deal of a child's play comes from a desire to feel in control of the outside world and their inner self. When children create elaborate and complex dramatic play scenarios they are making decisions about their life, which is translated beautifully into the rich and meaningful context of their play. Being able to express themselves through play, children are able to identify their feelings and a holistic sense of self, wherein physical, social, emotional and cognitive development is fully actualized.

This can be fully realized via a child's use of transitional objects embodied in "the process of exploration, investigation and creation – where it goes and how it looks – results from the negotiating that occurs between teacher and children and between the children as well" (Jones, Evans & Rencken, 2001, p. 129) rooted in trust and intimacy, which provides the precipice for further growth and human development.

## Human Development

Transitional objects are representative of every human developmental milestone, both for the individual self and the differential other. It is the "other" that is synonymous with the external source of identification, albeit mother/father. Transitional objects typify that which is rudimentary and sound. In essence, the object represents the process by which one can navigate life, experience a homeostatic inner balance, and cohesive sense of well-being at every developmental milestone.

According to Brenner (2004), transitional objects continue through the course of our lives, as "sacred keepsakes" which pull us back to "a place and time of great solace and memory" (p. 7). It is the dependence, identification and attachment to objects outside of the self, such as photographs, wedding bands, mementos, music, art and culture. These items can be defined as nostalgic memorials, but more importantly, and astutely, define a state of connection and presence in the adult world. However, if the cell phone, computer, watch, wallet or keys are left or forgotten-- the teddy, blanket or bottle misplaced or misbegotten -- one may feel disconnected, removed, displaced. It is the placement, allocation of and attendance to transitional objects, in the earliest of classrooms, which connects us to a secure base.

It is the secure base of human development that I am drawn to celebrating where transitional objects not only bridge the connection from home to school but allow for the emergence of a child's inherent sense of self. As such, supported, respected and honored by early childhood educators in the same context as psychologist Abraham Maslow (1971), one's transitional object "matters more than anything else in the world" ... or as a two year old recently exclaimed in one of the classrooms where I work, holding her stuffed animal tight to her heart, "I love it so much I can't ever let go of it!" which typifies the relevance, significance and embodiment of the object as permanent in its states of impermanence.

As early childhood educators we are called to observe how the children in our classrooms use transitional objects, as well as respect, honor and appreciate the use as a fundamental construct of human development. How might teachers shape and substantiate the use of transitional objects in their classrooms as they reflect on their own experience both as a child and as an adult? Also, how might this influence or negate their response to these objects of attachment in representational and relational ways? A classroom can encourage and implement a gathering time where children's objects of meaning and attachment are spoken about, shared in context of their uniqueness and significance, documented and reflected upon. Reflections may include an observational and interpretive lens, as well as from a parental and educational perspective.

How can we encourage the use of transitional objects in the classroom as instrumental in the course of the separation/attachment process? Perhaps early childhood educators can advocate for the use of such said objects during the active separation/attachment process as a means by which a child can find immediate comfort and control over a seemingly difficult transition. For example, separating from a deeply loved maternal/paternal presence and forming an attachment to a supportive and deeply caring teacher, while the transitional objects acts as a point of interconnectivity.

How can we promote the use of transitional objects as a social/familial connector as well as an emotional stabilizer? Possibly these objects can find a permanent place in the classroom and become an integral, familiar and familial source of individuation

and identity.

The nature of these objects provide for and evoke an emotional landscape of thought, feeling and expression as well as states of intimate relatedness and responsiveness. By supporting the relationship a child has with their transitional object, [rooted in empathy, comfort and understanding] both at home and in school, a child's sense of self, social interconnectivity and emotional maturation will be fundamentally experienced in deep and meaningful ways.

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