

Breastfed Children and Attachment Objects

Fiona Audy

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When my oldest children were small, people were often surprised that they didn't have a blanket or stuffed animal which went everywhere with them. As someone who had just taken a lot of university developmental psychology courses I was also a bit surprised that my children didn't have "attachment objects" because I had learned that these were a normal part of child development. Shortly after I started attending La Leche League meetings I came across a book in the Group library called "Your Baby's Mind and How it Grows; Piaget's theory for parents" by Mary Ann Spencer Pulaski c 1978. This book put everything I had learned in university into very practical day-to-day living terms and helped me understand and see the amazing intellectual changes that were taking place in my children from birth through the first three years. In the process of explaining why "attachment objects" are a normal part of development it also explained to me why my children and many breastfed babies and toddlers don't have an "attachment object".

Pulaski describes the period from 8 months to 12 months as the "emergence of intention". This is a period of increasing physical activity as well as intentional goal-directed behaviour. Babies start to remember cause and effect and apply previously successful actions to other objects or goals. During this period children also start to develop the concept of mother as a separate person from themselves and the idea that objects continue to exist even when they can't be seen. This discovery period is the time of separation anxiety when mummy leaves the room because for a while, to the child, that which can't be seen does not exist. So if they can't see mummy she has ceased to exist. You can imagine how distressing it would be for a child to whom mother is part of self to suddenly have part of that self disappear. The feeling would be similar to what an adult would feel if they woke up in the morning and an arm or leg was missing. Panic! Peek-a-boo and hiding toys under a small blanket are great games at this stage to foster development of the concept of object permanence, as well as being good fun for parents and babies.

It is during this stage that babies develop object permanence. They start to venture a little further away from mother but still come back for frequent emotional refueling (a term coined by child psychoanalyst Margret Mahler). It is also at this time that many babies in North America are weaned and may start to attach to an object such as a blanket or toy. Pulaski describes the attachment object in this way: "Holding and being held by the blanket reproduces for the baby the warmth and closeness of being held in his mother's arms, while his thumb replaces her nipple. Particularly if he is being weaned, as is frequent around six to eight months, he may find substitute comfort in snuggling up to a soft pliable object which reminds him of his mother's body. It becomes a cherished possession which forms a link between him and his mother..." She goes on to say that children usually outgrow their attachment objects by the time they are four years old.

When children breastfeed beyond the six to eight month period they are more likely to be weaning at time when they have more fully developed the concepts of mother as a separate being from themselves and object permanence (that which can't be seen still exists). During this crucial period of brain development many breastfed children won't have attached to an object because they haven't needed to; they still have all the connection to mother for emotional and nutritional refueling that they need. For breastfeeding babies and toddlers their attachment object is often their mother rather than a substitute for her. Like most children who will have moved on from their attachment objects by the age of four so will most breastfeeding children have moved on from breastfeeding. My children certainly had favourite toys during this stage of their lives but none that ever required a 200 kilometer back track when forgotten at Grandma's or hours of tears when the blanket simply had to be washed as I heard from

many other mothers. Pulaski helped me understand why my children were very attached to me, how normal this behaviour was and most important to feel confident that this was not going to be a permanent state of affairs. Now that they are adults I often wish they would phone home more often to reconnect with me! Enjoy this time of being the centre of your child's world, it will be gone before you know it.