

TRANSITIONAL OBJECTS IN EARLY CHILDHOOD: WHAT PARENTS' THINK ABOUT THEIR IMPORTANCE?

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Abstract

The period of transition and adjustment in a new environment is a very dynamic and challenging phase in the life of every child and also of his/her parents. They have a strong impact on the child's psychological well-being and the strategies the child will later use during times of various adjustments and transitions. Having in mind this significant influence on the child's well-being, it is important to address the quality and manner in which the child will cope with the adjustment in kindergarten in order to provide adequate support and a sense of security. Transition is closely related to transitional objects defined as objects, most often soft toys that are chosen by the child chooses and that are irreplaceable in the new situation because they provide comfort in the separation from the caregiver and security in this situation. The use of transitional objects eases the child's transitions. Previous research has shown that the educational system is aware of their use and their role in the social-emotional functioning of toddlers and preschoolers, which is evident in the practice of kindergartens and schools. However, the question arises as to how parents perceive their importance, which is also the main objective of this study. Therefore, an online survey with 29 questions was conducted among a sample of 100 parents (82 mothers) of preschool children in Croatia. The results of the survey suggest that the attitude of parents is positive, and through their partial agreement, positive experiences with transitional institutions and their great importance in moments of adjustment into the new environment, i.e. kindergarten, are highlighted. Parents emphasized the frequent, everyday use of transitional objects during transitions, as well as their facilitation of the whole process. Based on the survey and its results, the frequent use and variety of transitional objects such as stuffed animals, toy cars, cloths, pacifiers and bottles, and various toys is evident. Because there is a significant lack of empirical research on transition and the importance of transitional objects, the contribution of this article is evident in the context of increasing knowledge and sharing experiences of parents of early childhood and preschool children. With its diversity, it will contribute greatly to the progress of educational practice. The adjustment process itself is a big step in the life of every child and should be treated with a lot of respect and understanding.

Keywords: *Children of an early and preschool age, parents, transitions, transitional objects, well-being.*

1. Introduction

Childhood transitions represent periods in children's lives that are filled with numerous mixed emotions that can affect children's well-being in positive or negative ways, whether we focus on short-term or long-term transition effects (Mashburn, LoCasale-Crouch & Pears, 2018; Pianta & Cox, 1999; Pianta & Kraft-Sayre, 2003; Tatalović Vorkapić, 2019a,b; 2020, 2021a,b; Tatalović Vorkapić & LoCasale-Crouch, 2021). So, it is of utmost importance to explore transition's determinants, i.e., all factors that can facilitate childhood transitions and ensure children's socio-emotional well-being (Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2000). One of those important factors are transitional objects, which are defined as follows: "An object, typically a soft toy, chosen by an infant or child. Irreplaceable, the object is imbued with the child's feelings for and experience of his or her primary caretaker. The child uses the transitional object to aid the transition from primary dependence to independence." (Wilson & Robinson, 2002:861). Winnicott (1953), a British pediatrician and psychoanalyst, studied transitions and transitional objects. He found that children have a strong need to possess a particular object, especially during separation from their attachment figures. Such transitional object has a symbolic function in maintaining continuity of closeness to parents during difficult separation situations. Transitional objects are often cuddly toys such as stuffed animal, as well as blankets or other soft materials that retain the child's familiar smell and provide great comfort (Tatalović Vorkapić, 2021c). They play an important role in the child's psychological development and well-being and are thought to facilitate the individuation process by replacing the primary caregiver and facilitating separation within the developmental stage of autonomy and its conflict with the child's dependency (Mahler, 1972). A study by Bachar and colleagues (1998) found that participants who reported

frequent use of transitional objects and high levels of attachment also had optimal attachment to their mothers and higher levels of well-being. Objects such as toys, pacifiers, and wipes provide children with an additional sense of comfort and security. Such objects represent a connection to children's family and home, and their absence can cause discomfort, anxiety, and sadness in children.

According to a previous study (Tatalović Vorkapić, 2021c) conducted on a sample of 287 pre-service and in-service educators across Croatia, predominantly positive experiences during childhood transition were found. The largest number of initial transitions was from home to kindergarten, where parents or caregivers provided the most support. Soft toys are cited as the most commonly used transitional object, followed by blankets and pillows, then pacifiers and bottles. They are often chosen by children later on as well, and not just in the early days, because they provide comfort, security, and peace of mind as they fall asleep. In addition, of all the sensations, the early childhood educators interviewed cited touch as the most common sensation by which they experience the comfort provided by their transitional object. This rare research in Croatia shows that educators have had different experiences with transitional objects during childhood transition and are aware of their importance to psychological well-being in childhood. In addition, it is necessary to mention another study conducted with the aim of investigating the perspective of children, parents and educators on the organization of the transition from home to kindergarten during the coronavirus pandemic (Tatalović Vorkapić, 2022). Regardless of the major problems that occurred during the pandemic, this research highlighted the particular satisfaction of parents and educators with the cooperation with the kindergarten. Parents, children, and educators pointed out the good (e.g., more time spent outdoors by children, separation from parents already at the beginning of kindergarten, which contributed to greater development of independence) and bad aspects of the organization of the transition (e.g., lack of touch opportunities, wearing face masks, and inability to bring a transitional object to kindergarten) during the pandemic. Even though, most parents emphasize children's successful adjustment in kindergarten, children reported about missing their transitional object in kindergarten. Following the contemporary Ecological-dynamic model of transition (Rimm-Kaufman & Pianta, 2000), the paper emphasizes the great importance of interpersonal relationships in the culture in which a child lives, thus exploring the perspectives of educators and children as well as parents (Early et al., 2001; Einarsdóttir, Perry & Dockett, 2008).

2. Research design & objectives

Considering the significance of transitional objects during children's transitions, parents' perceptions of the importance and use of transitional objects for their preschool-aged children were explored through an online survey. In light of previous research, it is expected that parents will show positive perceptions of transition objects in relation to their importance and that they will indicate the frequency and importance of their children's use of various transition objects during transition.

3. Methods

3.1. Participants

A total of 100 parents of children enrolled in kindergarten in Lovran, Croatia, participated in this study. Among the respondents were 18 fathers and 82 mothers. The average age of the parents was 34 years ($M=33.6$, $SD=4.52$), and the age range was from 24 to 46 years. Parents estimated the duration of their children's adjustment in kindergarten to range from 0 to 10 months, with an average adjustment duration of two months ($M=1.89$, $SD=1.71$). The sample of children studied also included $N=100$ children (42 girls, 58 boys). The average age of the children was 4 years ($M=3.81$, $SD=1.36$) with a range of 1 to 7 years.

3.2. Measures & procedure

For the purpose of this study, an online survey using a Google form was created for parents. The introductory part of the survey included Informed consent and instructions for parents. It consisted of 27 closed-ended questions and three open-ended questions, which can be seen in the Table 1. Because the survey was designed as an integral part of the university science project "*Children's well-being in transition periods: The empirical validation of Ecological-dynamic model*", the approvals of the National Ministry of Science and Education and the Ethics Committee of the Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities at the University of Rijeka were used for communication with kindergarten directors. After obtaining consent to conduct the study in the kindergartens of Lovran, the invitation to the study was sent to the parents of the registered children. Data collection was anonymous and confidential, and feedback was provided.

4. Results & discussion

The collected data were processed at a descriptive level, including basic statistical parameters: Means (M) and Standard Deviations (SD) of the results, which can be seen in Table 1. On average, there

were no responses where parents did not completely agree with any of the items. Furthermore, parents partially disagreed with three items, namely that their child participates more easily in interactions with other children when they do not have a transitional object, that they do not feel the need to retrieve the transitional object when the child forgets it due to his/her anxiety, and that the child is not upset when one leaves without a transitional object. The "maybe" responses were expressed by parents with a larger number of items, 7. This expressed their divided opinion on the following questions: does their child cry and feel restless and grumpy when they do not have their transitional object with them; whether the transitional object affects their interaction with other children and sharing the transitional object with them; whether the transitional object affects their communication with the child; the role of transitional objects during the pandemic in terms of the impossibility of their adoption and possible impact on the children; and whether transitional objects are also items of clothing that the child brings from home. This shows partial agreement with the previous studies in Croatia (Tatalović Vorkapić, 2022).

Table 1. Descriptive parameters (Means, Standard Deviations) of questionnaire items and in total.

Items	M	SD
My child participates less in interactions with the rest of the educational group when there is no transitional object.	2.30	1.13
Many times we have returned home to get the transitional object and bring it to our son/daughter because it was very sad and/or frustrating without it.	2.33	1.30
When we go somewhere, kindergarten or otherwise, and we forget to bring a transitional object, my child gets very upset.	2.52	1.21
My child cries more when he doesn't have a transitional object with him/her.	2.67	1.27
My child feels bad ((s)he's grumpy, cries, doesn't cooperate) when (s)he doesn't bring his/her transitional object to kindergarten even though (s)he wants to.	2.84	1.21
My child is more open to interactions and prefers to play with peers when (s)he has his/her transition object with him/her in kindergarten.	2.89	1.25
During the pandemic, bringing transitional objects was hard or prohibited altogether, making the transition more difficult.	2.93	1.37
I find it easier to establish and maintain communication with my child when (s)he has his/her transitional object with him/her during transition and adjustment.	3.07	1.29
Transitional objects are very often clothing items that the child brings from home.	3.13	1.18
My child is hesitant to share his/her transitional object with others.	3.27	1.30
When my child entered kindergarten, the adjustment was quick.	3.66	1.25
Soft toys or so-called stuffed animals are very often a transitional object.	3.91	1.07
As a parent, I am very aware of the importance of using a transitional object for my child.	3.93	1.15
Transitional objects are very important for children during the transition and adjustment period.	3.97	1.15
Transitional objects are very often children's favorite toys.	4.04	0.98
During the transition and adjustment period, both educators should be constantly working with the children in the group.	4.06	1.01
Transitional objects are very important for a quality and easier transition and adjustment of the child in the kindergarten.	4.09	1.13
Transitional objects are the greatest comfort for a child when they go to sleep or when they experience a negative emotion (when they are (s)he is sad or miss their parents).	4.10	1.01
Transitional objects are often objects that comfort the child (pacifier, feeding bottle, etc.).	4.12	1.05
The relationship the child has with me (the parent), i.e., the type of bond he or she has developed with me, is critical to the quality of the transition and the child's adjustment in kindergarten.	4.19	0.96
I am satisfied with the quality of my child's adjustment to kindergarten.	4.21	0.94
Good organization of the kindergarten's work is essential for the quality of my child's transition and adjustment to kindergarten.	4.21	1.03
When the child has his/her own transitional object, (s) he calms down faster and feels in an unfamiliar environment.	4.23	0.98
I believe that kindergartens should always allow the child to bring his/ her transitional object to kindergarten.	4.26	1.08
Transitional objects give children a sense of and security in a new, unfamiliar situation.	4.28	0.91
My child is happy and content in kindergarten.	4.46	0.83
For a good transition and adjustment of the child in kindergarten, it is crucial that the early childhood educators get to know each child coming to kindergarten very well.	4.64	0.81
It is very important to achieve a good cooperation with the early childhood educators in the group where my child is enrolled.	4.70	0.70
Total	3.69	0.68

Parents expressed their partial agreement with most of the items, more precisely with 15 of them, and their full agreement with 4 of them, which shows the dominance of positive attitudes towards the importance and influence of transitional objects for their children during the transition and adjustment in kindergarten (Table 1). It was found that parents are aware of the importance of transition objects for their children and have a positive image of their children's transition. Partial agreement also refers to the materials from which transition objects are most often made, as well as the reassuring role of the transition object during the transition. In addition, parents emphasized the importance of good cooperation with the early childhood educators of the educational group in which the child experiences transition, and parents gave the highest score in this category to the statement that their child is happy and satisfied in kindergarten. Looking at the average result of parents' responses to all items, it was found that parents attach importance to transitional objects ($M=3.69$, $SD=.67$), what was expected.

The remaining three statements in the parent survey were processed qualitatively. Regarding the first open-ended question: *Choose which sensation is most associated with the comfort that the transitional object provides to your child*, it was found that most parents chose touch as the sensation that provides the most comfort to their child, followed by sight, smell, and taste, as in previous research (Tatalović Vorkapić, 2021c). The last two open-ended questions were evaluated according to the specified frequencies: *If there were an ideal transitional object, what do you think it would look like? Please describe it;* and *Please list all the transitional objects your child has used so far*. It was found that the ideal transitional object was also a stuffed animal in $N=27$ cases, followed by wipes and pacifiers and all soft, comfortable, lightweight and easily washable materials, which is a confirmation of previous research. Six parents stated that there is no ideal transitional object, and three of them do not know which object would be an ideal transitional object. Most parents responded that the transitional object in their child's life was a stuffed animal (bear, bunny, unicorn, horse, dog, dolphin, etc.) ($N=24$). 17 parents stated that their child did not have a transitional object. The use of a pacifier as a transitional object ($N=14$) is also not at all surprising, as children at an early age relieve their stress through oral stimulation, thus facilitating separation from the mother, and this type of stimulation is one of the most common (Gulerce, 1991).

5. Conclusions

The purpose of this study was to examine the meaning and use of transitional objects during preschool children's transition and adjustment in kindergarten from the parents' perspective. Using an online survey developed specifically for this study, the purpose was to examine how parents view the importance and use of transition objects for their preschool children. The results of the survey suggest that parents' attitudes are positive, and their partial agreements highlight positive experiences with transitional objects and their great importance in moments of adjustment to a new environment, i.e. kindergarten. Parents emphasized the frequent, daily use of transitional objects during the transition period, as well as their usefulness and facilitation of the whole process, which is consistent with the perception of kindergarten teachers from the previous research. Although this study has the limitation of a relatively small and selected sample, as there are very few studies that focus on transition and the importance of transition objects when children are adjusting into kindergarten or a new environment, the contribution of this study is to expand knowledge and share the experiences of parents of early and preschool-aged children. With its diversity, it will contribute greatly to the advancement of educational practice. The transition is a major step in any child's life and should be taken seriously in terms of quality kindergarten transition practices. Practical implications of this study could be seen in the need for better quality collaboration with parents, informing them about the benefits of transitional objects during their children's transition.

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