

Not without my Teddy!

The companions of childhood



A collaborative study produced by the “Chances for Children through Play” Foundation and the International Central Institute for Youth and Educational Television (IZI)

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I. The companions of childhood

Favourite cuddly toys – favourite dolls – favourite security blankets

“Because she’s my best friend, and sometimes still talks to me even in bed.”

(Elisabeth, 6 years, on her hippopotamus Paula)

In factual terms they are products made of fur, cloth, or plastic, sometimes produced with more love, sometimes with less, in an endlessly flourishing market. For children, however, they are far more. For them they are unique, carry a high emotional charge, and provide security and comfort as a “transitional object” (Winnicott, 1973).¹ For children teddy bears, dolls, or sometimes even a cloth rag are companions with a “soul”; the “companions of childhood”. As the first possession entirely of one’s own, these companions play an important role in the psychological development and socialisation of children as a “personal object” (cf. for example Habermas, 1996).² And even in adult years, survey respondents still remember the great emotional significance of their favourite cuddly toy, which was always at hand to be cuddled, to dispense comfort, accompany their play, or help them sleep. Roughly half the adults who declare that they had one “main” childhood companion still possess the cuddly toy or doll from those times even today (Stiftung “Chancen für Kinder durch Spielen” [“Chances for Children through Play” Foundation], 2007).

What sort of companions do children in Germany have at present? What functions do they perform in everyday life? What has changed in comparison with older generations? For the first time, a broadly based study conducted by the “Chances for Children Through Play” Foundation and the International Central Institute for Youth and Educational Television (IZI) has researched these questions.

“It’s very important that, every evening, he has his security blanket with him. Without the blanket it’s no go.”

(Diary entry of a mother, 41 years; son, 4 years)

- Over 700 mothers were questioned about their 1- to 6-year-old children’s companions in a **representative sampling**.³
- 32 parents reported on their 2- to 8-year-old children’s behaviour with their cuddly toys and dolls over a period of 6 to 8 weeks in **diary entries**.
- Over 50 kindergarteners told the research team about their childhood companions in **one-to-one interviews**.



¹ Winnicott, Donald W., *Vom Spiel zur Kreativität* (“Playing and Reality”) (Stuttgart: Klett, 1973).

² Habermas, T., *Geliebte Objekte: Symbole und Instrumente der Identitätsbildung* (“Favourite Objects: Symbols and Instruments of Identity Formation”) (Berlin, New York: de Gruyter, 1996).

³ This enabled a cautious comparison to be made with the results of a survey which the “Chances for Children through Play” Foundation had already conducted in 2007. 1,000 men and women aged between 16 and 69 from all over Germany were questioned about the dolls and cuddly toys of their childhood and their functions. Source: Stiftung “Chancen für Kinder durch Spielen” (ed.), *Grundlagen-Untersuchung Puppen – Teddys – Stofftiere in der Kindheit* (“Basic Investigation: dolls, teddies, and cuddly toys in childhood”) (<http://www.puppenstiftung.de>)

I. The companions of childhood

1. Who they are and what they are called

Children in Germany possess cuddly animals, dolls, and similar toys. In addition, most children between the ages of 1 and 6 have a quite specific favourite cuddly toy or doll. For the most part, they select these childhood companions relatively early from the diverse range they are offered. Some change their favourite doll or cuddly toy once again later on, and some have several between which they switch back and forth. Nevertheless the tendency is unmistakable: children have their favourites among their cuddly toys and dolls, and only in the case of 1 in 4 children are mothers unable to identify a definite partner.

In terms of their material properties, for the most part these companions are furry animals, and most frequently they present the appearance of teddy bears, dogs, rabbits, and polar bears. Especially amongst 1- and 2-year-old children the teddy bear is very much in the lead in terms of popularity, at 42%. For 1 in 3 girls, dolls assume the role of particularly significant play partners from their third birthday onwards. Besides these cuddly toys and dolls, however, there are also children who choose a security blanket or a specific cloth nappy to accompany them as constantly as possible.

In terms of names, the children – especially the younger ones – as often as not give their companions obvious names using the terms of product descriptions, such as “Teddy”, “Barbie”, or “Baby”. Often, the children appropriate names from the media, such as “Robbi” (seal), “Felix” (rabbit), or “Knut” (polar bear). These names are not, however, specifically limited to licensed cuddly toys, but may serve to lend significance to any polar bear, seal, or rabbit. Actual licensed toys tend to occur rather seldom. Frequently, however, the children also devise quite individual onomastic creations for their companions, for example “Bonzo”, “Loppi”, “Uncle Bu”, “Friddin-Flosse” (German “Flosse” = “flipper”), “Regina Baby Body”, or “Wampfi” (German “Wampe” = “paunch”, “belly”). They derive from everyday life, and are presumably sound formations which become ritualised and eventually lead to names such as “No-No” for a companion.



I. The companions of childhood

2. Girls – boys, similarities and differences

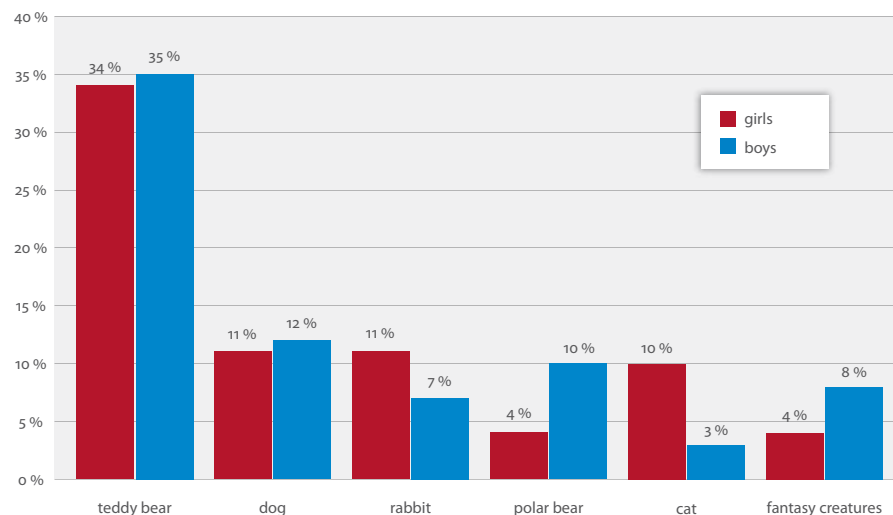
For both girls and boys, the companions they have chosen are important. Girls, however, more frequently possess particularly significant companions. For around 1 in 3 boys, mothers are unable to detect any absolute favourite cuddly toy or doll.



Until the end of their third year, the companions of girls and boys are relatively similar. Most often a teddy bear is chosen as favourite cuddly animal. Then, from the third birthday onwards, their preferences become differentiated along gender-specific lines. As before, the teddy bear remains the most frequent companion, but for 4 out of 10 girls a doll now becomes particularly significant. In families with several children in the household this is more frequently a baby doll, which above all acquires significance when a little sibling enters the family. It is rather seldom that the girls' particularly significant favourite doll is an adult figure, for example Barbie. These girls tend to come from families with higher financial income and a higher level of education. An intensive preference for Barbie is, therefore, not a phenomenon associated with lower class environments. This however has less to do with the high purchase costs, as for example in the case of the "All American Girls" dolls⁴, since Barbie and similar brands actually fall within the middle to low price segment of the toy market. Presumably, the enthusiasm for Barbie as an unambiguously adult doll should rather be interpreted as a sign of appreciation of femininity, such as is demonstrated for example by the "Princess Lillifee" brand.⁵

Boys, for the most part, choose furry animals as their companions (82%), and dolls only in exceptional cases. Instead security blankets and cloth nappies appear more frequently as companions, above all for 1- to 2-year-olds, and sometimes also plastic figures, which girls choose as companions only in exceptional cases. If a boy chooses a furry animal, then it is most often a teddy bear, followed in the rankings by dogs, polar bears, and various fantasy figures which, however, for the most part only acquire significance for children from the age of 3 upwards.

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Favourite cuddly toy types⁶

⁴ In the USA, the "All American Girls" brand of dolls was deliberately developed with the aim of providing higher income middle class groups with high-price giftware. A single doll has a purchase price of around \$100 and can be chosen from a selection of around 30 dolls according to individual skin, hair, and eye colour. Subsequent clothing costs amount to not less than \$26 per outfit. In the participating shops, which can only be found in certain cities, there are not only matching outfits for girls and dolls on offer, but also hairdressers, coffee shops etc., in which girls can have their hair cut or be served along with their dolls. Love of dolls here becomes a deliberately staged event, which middle class parents can still afford as a one-off experience.

⁵ In this connection see also: Phänomen Prinzessin Lillifee: Die neue Wertschätzung von Weiblichkeit ("The Princess Lillifee Phenomenon: the new appreciation of femininity"); Götz, M.; Cada, J., 'Die Creme von Lillifee' riecht nach Rosa": Prinzessin Lillifee im Alltag von Familien" ("Lillifee's cream 'smells of pink': Princess Lillifee in the everyday life of families"); In: *Television 22* (2/2009), pp. 30-35.

⁶ n = 526 mothers questioned, whose children possessed at least one favourite cuddly toy

II. What childhood companions mean in everyday life

Parents' diary entries

In early childhood, children often have cloth, fur, or plastic companions which are quite special for them. They are partners, they must never be absent at bedtime, and parents report of the emotional anxieties which occur when the favourite companion has been mislaid somewhere. Even these rather casual anecdotes give some inkling of the kind of significance which is attached to favourite cuddly toys or dolls in everyday life. In reminiscences, adults can recall various functions of their companions even today ("Chances for Children through Play" Foundation, 2007). However, a more broadly based, systematic collection of data on how these companions are integrated into everyday life, and how children use them, has to date been lacking, both at national and international level. The underlying causes are determined by methodology, since the period before the sixth birthday is only accessible to memory in very incomplete fragments. A survey of parents afforded an insight into surface details as well as depths, since the question of how children make everyday use of their cuddly toys is so squarely situated in the category of "the self-evident" that parents (and children) are only conscious of it in particularly significant moments.⁷ Accordingly, more costly qualitative methods, which make it possible to record everyday occurrences, are necessary in this case.



As part of this study, 32 parents kept diary records of their observations of, and experiences with the companions of their 2- to 8-year-old children over a period of 6 to 8 weeks. Each scene was described and if possible photographed or subsequently sketched on a pre-prepared sheet. This survey method has already proven successful in other contexts, such as behaviour in front of the television or experiences of humour in children's everyday lives.⁸ Typical functions were extrapolated from the 420 everyday scenes obtained in this way in which the childhood companions were of particular significance. This has made it possible to gain an insight into the significance of favourite cuddly toys and dolls in the everyday life of children aged 2 to 8, in a form which is unique to date.

Schreibung:
Um welche Art von Kuscheltier Puppe handelt es sich? Ist es das Lieblingskuscheltier? Hat das Kuscheltier einen Bezug zu den Medien, ist z.B. eine Pflüchtlager zu einer Fernsehserie? Ist das Kuscheltier von einer bestimmten Marke? ..)

Elvis ist eine schwarze Katze, bekannt aus dem ARD-Mittagsmagazin. Und da Jannik's Oma das immer anschaut, hat sie die Katze ihm zu seinem 2. Weihnachtsgeschenk - Jannik war da 1 1/2 Jahre alt. Die Katze war damals noch nicht wichtig, er hat sie zwar manchmal herangehten, aber es dauerte noch ca. 1 Jahr bis er von sich aus mit ihr gespielt hat und Elvis ihn begleitet hat.
Sie heißt Elvis wie unsere echte Katze.
Elvis war von Anfang an mit ihm im Bett zum Einschlafen dabei und später auch bei allen längeren Autofahrten und Ausflügen. Auch wenn Jannik woanders bzw. ohne uns übernachtet hat, war/ist Elvis dabei.

Elvis ist schwarz und richtig kuschlig weich. Seine Arme, Beine und sein Schwanz sind recht locker gefüllt, so dass man ihn da gut greifen kann (und auch prima herumwickeln kann).

und ob ich Lisa bekommt
die andere Schwester. (Eisba)
Und die Welt ist wieder
Ordung.

Vorlage zur Beschreibung von konkreten Situationen und Erlebnissen

Schreiben Sie bitte ein bis zwei Situationen pro Woche.
A welchen Situationen braucht Ihr Kind sein Kuscheltier? Wie kam es zu der Situation? Wann verlangt Ihr Kind nach seinem Kuscheltier? Woher wird das Kuscheltier mitgenommen? Was spielt Ihr Kind mit seinem Gefährten? Welche Geschichten und Eigenschaften projiziert es auf die Figur?

Wir würden Sie außerdem um eine Schilderung der genauesten Details bitten, welches Motiv hinter der Interaktion mit dem Kuscheltier, der Puppe etc. stand

Schreiben Sie bitte einfach bunt gemischt Ihre Ergebnisse auf, auch wenn es Situationen gibt, die sich ähnlich sind.

Situationsbeschreibung vom (bitte Datum eintragen): 28.01.25
Name des Kindes und der Kuscheltiere: LUCA PANDA
"Papa, ich weiß wo die Panda ist..."
Luca ist unterwegs in die Wohnung mit dem Kuscheltier - Panda. Das Tier spricht Italienisch (Papa ist Italiener) aber mit Deutsch - Panda sagt "Ja" und "Nein" mit dem Kopf - Das Kind hat einen roten Nasen mit der Hand bedeckt.
Er will mit dem Panda und deckt den Fuß mit einem roten...
-realizing.com (bitte Datum eintragen): 28.01.25

⁷ In the sense in which the term is used in the sociology of knowledge; cf. Berger, P.L. and Luckmann, T., Die gesellschaftliche Konstruktion der Wirklichkeit: Eine Theorie der Wissenssoziologie ("The Social Construction of Reality: a treatise in the sociology of knowledge") (Frankfurt am Main: Fischer, 1969).

⁸ For the behaviour of mothers during pregnancy and early childhood cf. Götz, M., Bachmann, S., and Hoffmann, O., "Just a babysitter? Functions of television viewing in the daily life of children up to 5 years old from a parental perspective", TelevIZion 20 (E/2007), pp. 35-39. On experiences of humour with children, see: Neuss, N., "Humor von Kindern. Empirische Befunde zum Humorverständnis von Grundschulkindern" ("Children's humour: empirical findings on primary school children's understanding of humour"), TelevIZion 16 (1/2003), pp. 12-17.

II. What childhood companions mean in everyday life

Functions of childhood companions

The descriptions from everyday life show that children use their particularly significant companions in a variety of ways. Often they grab hold of their favourite cuddly toy or doll several times a day, particularly frequently at bedtime or in situations which present a special challenge for the child, such as a journey or a visit to the doctor. However, children also frequently play with their favourite companions, and deploy them in different roles and in numerous ways. According to the way in which the child utilises the companion, the latter acquires quite distinct functions. These can be divided into two main super-categories:

On the one hand, the companion serves the purpose of **emotional reassurance** and constitutes a strategy developed by the child for **negotiating everyday life** – one of their self-healing mechanisms.

On the other hand, the favourite cuddly toy or doll is deployed in games, above all in the field of role-play. These are well-documented children's strategies for handling and processing lived experience. In them the companion takes on various roles: it becomes the child, the doctor, the animal to be transported, or some fantasy creature – according to whatever role the child allocates to it. In this case the favourite cuddly toy becomes part of their **identity negotiation** and serves the purpose of **self-development**.



In the following, the typical (i.e. frequently recurring) functions of favourite cuddly toys and dolls will be briefly presented with the aid of examples. In addition to a short classification of the significance of each function (in terms of humanistic psychology), the qualitative demands on the fabric of companions will also be examined.

II. What childhood companions mean in everyday life

1. Emotional support at bedtime

For almost all children, the favourite cuddly toy is their companion at bedtime. It structures and watches over the farewell to everyday life and the transition from day into night. Subjectively, the companion gives them security and they need it "to cuddle in the night, because he has to look after me", according to 5-year-old Tom. Often there are tiny rituals which children have developed for themselves, as for example in the case of Lena (3 years), who closes her cuddly cat Benji's eye flaps. Only then can she close her own eyes. Parents are mostly aware of the important significance of the companions for going to sleep, and systematically integrate them into the daily bedtime ritual.



"In the evening Hannah is always allowed to watch 'The Sandman' on the children's channel. Afterwards she gets a bottle of milk and then has her teeth cleaned. I read her a little prayer and a goodnight story. Then it's bedtime. However her cuddly rabbit must on no account be absent. She still needs this to cuddle and to get to sleep. Then she's contented, and sleeps deeply and soundly."

(Diary entry of a mother, 30 years; daughter 2 years)



"Anna-Lena needs Ginger not only in the evening when going to sleep, but also when getting up. In the mornings she still likes to drink Kaba [cocoa drink] out of a bottle in bed. While drinking she holds Ginger in her arm and strokes and 'kneads' her."

(Diary entry of a mother, 40 years; daughter 4 years)

...and when getting up

Just as the companions provide an emotional support for the transition to night, for a whole host of children they also facilitate the passage out of night and back into day.

Here companions have an emotionally pacifying and reassuring function. Cuddly tactile qualities and a high capacity for resistance are particularly important. Usually it makes sense if its size allows the companion to be held securely in one's arm. However as a special reassurance, sometimes large cuddly toys and powerful animals can also be helpful in making the child feel safe.

II. What childhood companions mean in everyday life

2. Providing comfort when things go badly

Several parents describe how their children need their companions with particular emotional urgency when things are going badly for them. In this instance its presence helps and comforts in cases of sickness, or has a calming effect in cases of injury or minor accidents.

"While romping about on the sofa Raphael fell over the armrest onto the floor. He was deeply shocked and began to cry. He got up unharmed. I took him in my arms. He then wanted his pacifier and his polar bear. He held him tightly in his arm and squeezed him."

(Diary entry of a mother, 28 years; son 2 years)



On stressful or "bad" days too, when over-tired, or after quarrels, the companions are always waiting comfortingly at the child's side, supporting them in their efforts to come "to themselves" again.

"Jonas is not allowed on the computer, because he has already watched television. There are arguments and howls and screams. A proper little tantrum. Jonas is shown the red card and goes up to his room. As so often, he now needs someone to whom he can complain. He does this with Brummi and Elchi. He cries himself out and tells them both how mean his parents are, and that he's been treated unfairly. Very instructive for me as mother, if I have a chance to listen."

(Diary entry of a mother, 36 years; sons 2 and 5 years)

If conflicts occur, for example, the companion can serve as emotional support, help one to calm oneself again – but also as confidant for purposes of mental hygiene, with whom even children can really curse and complain and thus work off the emotional ballast.

Here the companions assume a supportive function, which helps restore equilibrium to an emotionality which has become unbalanced. Companions particularly charged with significance, who communicate familiarity, are required here. Material qualities which feel good to the sense of touch, and which do not, for example, pinch or prick, are also advantageous.

II. What childhood companions mean in everyday life

3. Providing security in challenging situations

From their second year onwards at the latest, the experience of autonomy and the consciousness of acting autonomously become important developmental themes for children. A process of differentiation and detachment from the parents takes place. Here the companion can provide a bridge and serve as “transitional object”. Children associate it with family protection, security, and reliability. As a companion, the cuddly toy helps children face the unknown or endure unpleasant things more easily.

During outdoor activities and challenges it provides a symbolic connection with home and in this way gradually supports the child in discovering and extending its own independence. Two frequently encountered situations in which the companionship of a cuddly toy is indispensable are journeys or days out, which are often combined with an overnight stay in an unfamiliar environment. Cuddly toys are also often present at activities such as visits to the doctor or registration at school.



“Visit to the dentist – actually the children aren’t afraid of it, because I always give them a coin for the toy dispenser as reward. But Karina feels stronger and safer if she takes her favourite cuddly toy with her. At the dentist’s she keeps Piggy in her lap and holds him very tight. She even thanks him for coming with her, and that everything is all right.”

*(Diary entry of a mother,
33 years; daughter 5 years)*

Here the companions take on a reassuring function. They are the link to the familiar, to what has already been mastered, and as such provide the confidence to master this new situation as well. Together with them, one is able to cope with everyday life in this way, and each new experience increases the significance with which they are charged. Particular material qualities are not required for this, since instead it is, above all, the individual and the challenges they have overcome (with the emotional support of the companion) which shape this allocation of significance.

II. What childhood companions mean in everyday life

4. Making nice things even more pleasant

Not only does the favourite cuddly toy serve children as companion in unfamiliar or especially demanding situations: it is also present during particularly pleasant events. Children enjoy quality cuddling time with their “chill-out” companion during the lunch break, or make themselves comfortable with them after a stressful day. Other children perhaps prepare a cuddly toy corner with bedding in the living room, so that they can look at a picture book or watch a television programme together with their companion.



„On Fridays Lukas is always allowed to stay up later, and we make ourselves comfortable on the couch with potato chips and lemonade. Of course the blanket, Toni, and the giraffe all have to be there as well. Toni and the giraffe are then nicely wrapped up in their woollen blanket and allowed to watch along with us. Then we all have less room on the couch, because the animals too must lie down comfortably.“

(Diary entry of a mother, 41 years; son 4 years)



Here the companions assume an emotionally intensifying function. The situation in itself is already pleasant, and the companions, charged with significance, intensify this emotionally positive feeling even more. Besides the self-involved aspect of this strategy – the child simply wants to have a good time – it is also a question of letting the cuddly toy have a good time. The empathetic feeling – the companion, as animate object, is now having a good time too – further intensifies the significance of the situation. This creates a feeling of care and responsibility, as though giving the cuddly toy a little bit back in return for what it has “achieved” for the child.

II. What childhood companions mean in everyday life

5. Playmate during the processing of experience

Children of preschool age frequently deal with everyday experiences through role-play. The “make believe” situation enables them to recreate experiences and, thereby, render them manageable and controllable. On several occasions, parents observed how their children systematically brought their favourite companions into play here. In these situations a role reversal often takes place, in which the companion assumes the role of the child. The children re-enact a situation they have experienced themselves – for example a visit to the doctor, having their hair washed, or a conflict situation at kindergarten – with their companion as deputy.



“Appointment with Leon at the paediatrician’s for a check-up. Doctor’s appointments are not a particular favourite of Leon’s. His bear was allowed to ride with him in the car to the doctor, but had to wait in the car (in case he forgets it, he doesn’t have it in bed in the evening). After the visit to the doctor his teddy had to put up with the complete medical treatment: being weighed and measured, playing ball, having an injection...”
(Diary entry of a mother, 33 years, son 3 years)

Here the companions assume the function of surrogates who re-experience the situation. They must “put up with” the situation all over again in the child’s place. This time, however, the child is in the position of the powerful agent. In this way, according to the individual experience, the experience of helplessness, for example, or denigration, or simply the meaning attached to the experience can be dealt with. The subjective experience of the child is reflected in small, rather casual interactions (“Now don’t behave like that”; “Right, now I’m just going to lay you down here, keep still”; or even “This is very important for you now, you mustn’t be afraid”). For parents, this is a wonderful opportunity to eavesdrop “secretly” without disturbing their children, and learn something about their perspectives.

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6. Playmate in confrontations with rules

As the child's surrogate, cuddly toys and dolls engage vicariously for them with developmental tasks, everyday problems, or desires. Rules – for example those which the parents have laid down and which have just been learnt – can be rehearsed once again by the children themselves through an objectivisation using their cuddly toys, and can thus be memorised and consolidated in the course of their re-enactment.

"Luca's gone to the toilet. He's in the bathroom with his panda. I come along and Luca explains to me that the panda also needs to go to the toilet (...) "And Panda has to wash his hands too, eh daddy?" Daddy: "Yes, great!" He acts as though the panda's also going to wash himself. At which I (daddy) have to intervene for practical reasons: the water is being sprayed everywhere. Luca dries his hands and the panda dries his hands too, helped by Luca. Luca: "Panda was a really good boy!"
(Diary entry of a father, 33 years; son 3 years)



Some children also use their cuddly toy to explore limits vicariously through play. The cuddly toy does the things which are actually not allowed.

"Mara Linn is playing with Froggy in front of her. Then I hear her playing around with swear words. Asked why and to whom she has just said "arsehole", she looks at me really innocently and says – already aware that it could make me angry: "Him over there – he said it; he's always saying it." I notice that she puts certain words into the frog's mouth which aren't used here at home. And then I have to scold him: she will almost never do it herself."

(Diary entry of a mother, 34 years; daughter, 3 years)

Children have a need for guidance, reassurance, and recognition. Here the companions take on an illustrative role, by means of which the child shows that it has understood something. It knows what is right and wrong. In its role-plays it demonstrates its knowledge of, and reassures itself of, specific sequences of actions, rules, and the consequences of transgressing them, both for its own benefit and that of others. At the same time the child is in the position of power, can shape the situation, and at times also influence others. For parents this is a good opportunity to reinforce the child's understanding of sequences of actions and recognise its willingness to adhere to rules. The quality of the companion here manifests itself above all through the personality and meaning which the child attributes to it. "Character traits" built into the object, for example a cheeky or loveable facial expression, can help here.

II. What childhood companions mean in everyday life

7. Playmate in fantasy games

In play activities of this kind, often the parents or other children are involved. The cuddly toy assumes a quite specific role allocated to it by the child, which in addition is often connected with the typical qualities of this particular animal. Tigers, for example, jump through tyres in circus performances, rabbits have to be treated in veterinary clinics, and dogs do tricks or accompany the police on criminal hunts. In some situations media experiences also provide the stimulus for play scenarios.



"Jannik has a friend from round the neighbourhood. The two of them start to play cops and robbers. David becomes a police guard dog and is given a place in a cardboard box as his dog kennel. Of course handcuffs form part of the game too, and from time to time David is handcuffed. Later on, everybody present is invited to a well-rehearsed police drama in the children's room. David plays along with them, and is fetched from his kennel by Jannik so that they can chase the robber together."
(Diary entry of a mother, 32 years; sons 5 and 2 years)

"Anna-Lena is playing cinemas in her room. She's often seen 'Mama Mirabelle's Home Movies' on TV [cartoon series on the PlayhouseDisney channel]. Anna-Lena invites us – mummy and daddy – into the cinema in her room, and we get to see a film (only in make-believe). A piece of cloth forms the screen, and Anna-Lena starts the film with a toy mobile phone. While we sit on children's stools, Ginger sits in a basket in the 'front row'. Anna-Lena turns out all the lights except for one lamp, and pretends that she's showing us a film. Of course there's something tasty to eat (in make-believe) for the audience (Ginger, mummy, daddy)."
(Diary entry of a mother, 40 years; daughter 4 years)



Here the companions assume the function of imaginary playmates. They are freely deployed as whatever partner the child needs at the moment. For this purpose the special companion is particularly suitable because of its emotional charge. However other dolls or cuddly toys can also take on equivalent roles.

Quality in this case can arise from the companion's consistency in its role as dog, cat, person, etc., but also from its "versatility for play" if it can be made to sit down or wear a necklace, etc. In this functional area licensed toys, or toys whose character is predetermined by their material form, can also be of use as a stimulus for play.

II. What childhood companions mean in everyday life

8. Playmate in caring games

Companions are, to a certain extent, very carefully looked after. As well as typical role-plays such as mother-father-child, various scenarios occur in everyday life in which dolls and cuddly toys are fed, washed, clothed, changed, put to bed, driven around, or have their nappies or clothes changed. These play activities are more frequently encountered among girls, but boys also look after their companions responsibly, and treat them with care.

For example, 5-year-old Karina plays with her dolls Bella and Louisa first, "ever since little sister Maxime's been here". Now the dolls have "become of absorbing interest for Karina. Bella is a talking doll, who even makes sucking noises when drinking out of the little bottle provided. That's why Karina enjoys feeding her. By contrast, Louisa is always having her nappies changed and being put to bed in a blanket."

(Diary entry of a mother, 33 years; daughter, 5 years)



Here the companions assume the function of objects to be cared for; in other words they are looked after and, in imaginary games, treated like living beings with their own needs. The administration of care here is two-sided, as has often been argued in the discussion on care in feminist discourse: it is the act of nurturing, but also the good feeling of nurturing others, which additionally has a lot to do with feelings of self-importance. Particularly when a new sibling appears, this is a beautiful experience but also an implicit message to the parents: "I'm important too, I can do that." And, on a subconscious level: "I'd like to be mollycoddled again too." In this case the quality of a toy is measured above all in terms of versatility of application – for example "ability to change its nappies", "dressability", and so on.

II. What childhood companions mean in everyday life

9. Conversation partner in reflections

*Five-year-old Karina is preoccupied with the idea of "her own pet" and discusses it with her cuddly toy: "Today we saw a 'baby cat' and discussed whether we could take her home with us. Karina very much wants to!" Before going to sleep she fetches her little mole toy: "Will I really get the kitten? My parents have promised me I will. But parents sometimes tell lies too ... What do you think? Would you like a baby kitten too? It's sooo sweet!" The mole becomes her conversation partner and advisor.
(Diary entry of a mother, 33 years; daughter, 5 years)*

Even preschool children already construct differentiated "inner" dialogues, in which they express the way they have experienced things, what their perspective is, and in which direction they would like to develop further. Unlike those of older children and adults, however, these "inner" dialogues are in part articulated externally. Here an important role is often allotted to the companion, as children relate how things went for them and, in imaginary dialogue with the toy, try to reassure themselves about their own position.

Here the companions assume a self-reassuring function. They are parasocial conversation partners and in this way help articulate feelings, organise ideas, or express desires: an important step in the development of a healthy self-identity.



II. What childhood companions mean in everyday life

Emotional support in negotiating everyday life

Bonding is a key factor in infants' health.⁹ As transitional objects, cuddly toys enable the child to create the emotional conditions of a bonding relationship. In the process they give security, warmth, and comfort. The child needs these feelings in order to be able to regard new situations and experiences not as threats, but as challenges. Viewed in this light, the children's companions are self-chosen strategies for negotiating everyday life and part of their self-healing mechanisms.

Material qualities such as softness, a size which is useful for the purpose in question (e.g. fitting under the arm for cuddling, portability, etc.) are advantages here. In itself it is the child, however, who gives the companion a "soul" and charges it with significance. Every time the companion is used, the significance allocated to it grows. It is the child who, by means of its emotional investment, gives the object a personality – cuddly toy, doll, blanket or whatever. By means of education, the process of allocating significance can be supported and, at least to a certain degree, guided. It is believed that the greatest influence that can be exerted occurs through the deliberate denigration of the object and the child's love for its companion. This emotional rejection of the child and denigration of its coping mechanisms amounts to a psychological injury of the child and, if possible, must be avoided.



Playmates for self-reassurance

Companions are systematically adopted for make-believe play, in which children reproduce what they have lived through and experienced, and develop it further. This process takes place in the form of communication with oneself (conversations with oneself and with the companion) or communication with others (parents, other children). In this way the game creates a symbolic space for the processing of lived experience. In this game, externally determined impressions become self-determined expressions. Through this efficient form of identity development, children counterbalance the minor injuries to their autonomy, respectful treatment, or recognition which they not infrequently experience. In this process, the companion is a contribution to self-reassurance and, in the broadest sense, to the maintenance of psychological health, selected and shaped by the child itself.

A corresponding sensitivity is required when dealing with these role-plays or intervening in them. For parents, the symbolic play is in fact a chance to learn more about the child's inner life, if – without disturbing the child – they involve themselves in the game as observers or participants under the child's direction.

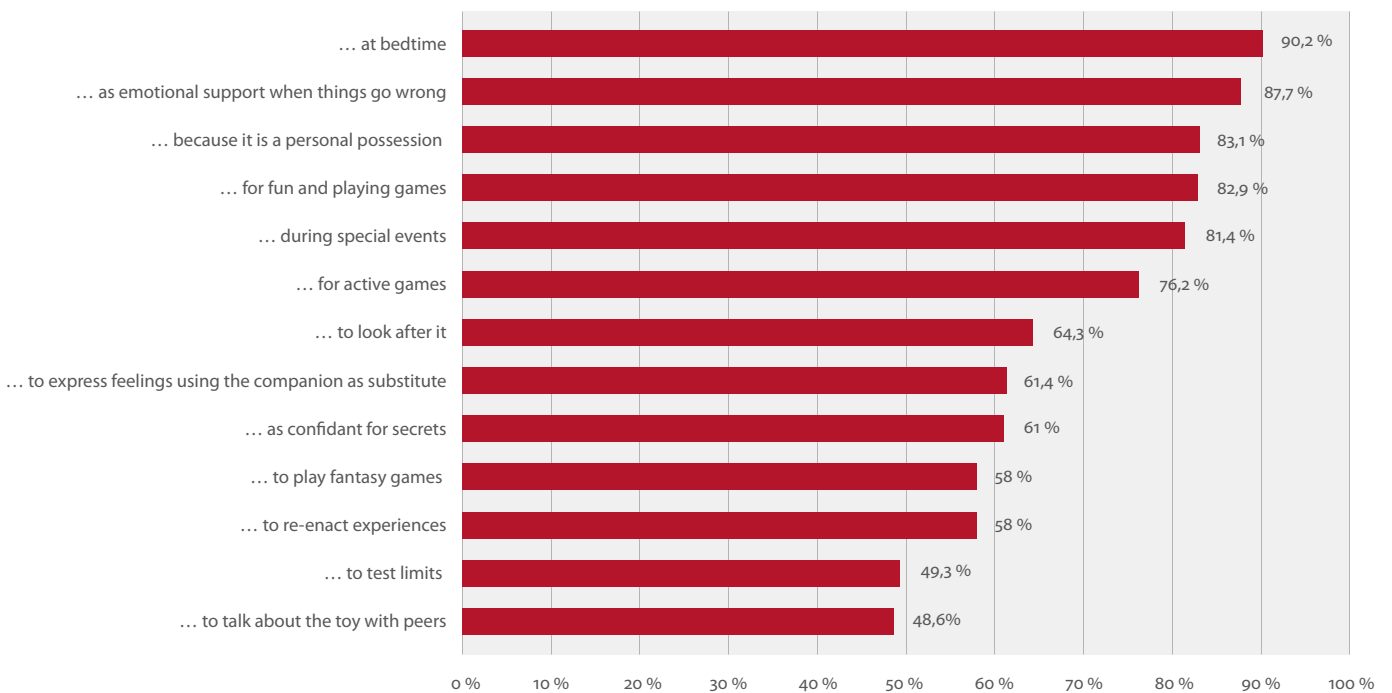
⁹ In psychology, bonding theory describes the human being's need to construct close relationships with fellow human beings which are distinguished by intense feelings. It was developed by the British child psychologist John Bowlby and the Canadian psychologist Mary Ainsworth. A human being's need for bonding is just as fundamental as the need for food, clothing, and sexuality.

III. Facts on the functions of the companions

1. Which functions are found among which children, and how often?

The qualitative diaries permit an insight into the everyday use and significance of favourite cuddly toys and dolls which, up to now, is unique. In order to go beyond these individual cases and gather statements about frequency and age/gender-specific tendencies as well, as a next step an enquiry was made into typical functions at a representative level. 708 mothers of 1- to 6-year-old children were asked to what extent the thirteen functions of companions, arranged in a four-point scale, could also be found in the daily lives of their children.¹⁰

My child needs its favourite cuddly toy/doll...



Functions which cuddly toys and dolls possess for children, from their mothers' perspective

(n = 526, top two boxes: all mothers whose children possess at least one favourite cuddly toy, and who agree fully and completely, or as far as possible, with the relevant statement)

Once again, the survey provides impressive proof of the high significance attached to favourite cuddly toys and dolls.

¹⁰ Distributed by quota according to age and sex of children, highest educational qualification of head of household, division according to federal region and size of community, marital status of mother; conducted by Iconkids & Youth .

III. Facts on the functions of the companions

2. Age and gender trends

The companions accompany children at bedtime

With 1- to 4-year-olds in particular, virtually every child is accompanied by its favourite cuddly toy or doll at bedtime. Only at the age of 5 or 6 there is a minority of children (5%) who never use their companions in this way.

The companions are an emotional support when things go wrong

While 85% of 1- to 2-year-old children use their companions in this way, among 3- to 6-year-olds the figure rises to 89%. Virtually no child never uses the favourite cuddly toy or doll in this manner.



The companions accompany children during special events

Only 2 out of 10 children do not use their childhood companions to accompany them through special events, such as travelling or visits to the doctor. The proportion is particularly high among 3- to 4-year-olds. In their case, the favourite cuddly toy or doll accompanies virtually every child, at least sometimes. But among 5- to 6-year-old children, too, 3 out of 4 children still rely on the companion for emotional security when facing special demands – girls still more frequently, and for longer than boys.



The companions are personal possessions and status symbols

According to statements by their mothers, for more than 80% of 1- to 6-year-olds it is important that their companion is something which belongs to the child alone. Cuddly toys are often children's first personal possessions with a high emotional significance. This function is important for all children, but from the third birthday onwards it increases even more. This also applies to the significance companions have for establishing one's status in relation to coevals. This, too, still plays a rather subordinate role among 1- to 2-year-olds, but in the case of 3- to 6-year-olds this is important for more than half the children – rather earlier among boys than among girls.

Expressing feelings using the companions as substitutes

Even among the youngest children, favourite cuddly toys or dolls are already used by over half the children for the surrogate expression of feelings and needs, something observed somewhat more frequently among boys than among girls. From the third birthday onwards, it is only 1 child in 10 who never uses the companion in this manner.

III. Facts on the functions of the companions

2. Age and gender trends

Companions as confidants for secrets

Sometimes children also use their favourite doll or cuddly toy to confide something in them. This function becomes important for many girls and boys from the third birthday onwards in particular.

Re-enacting experiences with the companions

More than half of the children need their companions in order to re-enact situations which they have experienced. While mothers do not observe this so often among 1- to 2-year-olds, in the case of 3- to 4-year-olds this function assumes importance for many children (over 72%). Among 5- to 6-year-olds, particularly boys, it then becomes noticeably less important once again.



Playing fantasy games with the companions

Although it is still rare that they play a key role among 1- to 2-year-olds, fantasy games with the companion become important for 3- to 6-year-olds – in the case of boys, somewhat earlier and more often than among girls.

Testing limits with the companions through play

Around half the children also occasionally use favourite cuddly toys or dolls to test limits through play. Mothers already observe this among 1- to 2-year-olds, and in the case of 3- to 6-year-olds it is approximately half the children – girls and boys to an equal degree – who use their companions to try and find out what happens if one does not adhere to the rules.

Looking after the companion

From time to time at least, children look after their favourite cuddly toys or dolls affectionately. This experience of "caring", i.e. giving help and affection and receiving them in return in the imagination, already plays a role among half the children of 1 to 2 years but then, from the age of 3 onwards, is even more frequently significant. Among girls it is somewhat more common than among boys, but even among boys caring for one's companion still plays a major role for 1 in 4 children.



IV. The companions from a child's perspective

1. Sensual experience

The diary entries and surveys of parents give a good overview of parents' observations and perceptions. But what do children themselves say about their companions? What constitutes the quality of their favourite cuddly toy or doll for them? Obviously for age-related reasons their opportunities for self-expression are still limited, but nevertheless from their perspective they can contribute further, quite important details about what makes this particular toy so important. 53 children between the ages of 3 and 6 gave us information in one-to-one interviews. Below are some excerpts from the summary, which supplement the functions derived from adults' points of view with further perspectives.



In the interview, Luis (3 years) emphasizes the haptic of his cuddly toy and tries to describe his aesthetic feeling:

I: *Why do you love your bear Fritz?*

L: *Because it has such a soft fur and because it is so soft and cuddly. And there are pearls inside.*

Asked what makes their cuddly toy so special or loveable, the majority of the children mention tactile properties of their companion. The variety of responses indicates how important the specific material nature of their favourite toy is for children.



In the children's descriptions intense sensual experiences with their cuddly toys emerge very clearly. 6-year-old Jasmin, for example, associates the following with her security blanket duo "Bob and Bobby": *"They can rustle their heads ... and because I can always wrap them round my neck."*



For Max (3 years), the soft texture of his cuddly toy is important for another reason. In the interview he points out that the special feature of his teddy – who is also called Max – is, *"that you can really squeeze him, you can really really squeeze him tight."*

By the same token, preschool children can also identify what it is about other cuddly toys that disturbs them.

Nina (4 years) tells the interviewer about a cuddly toy she does not play with often: *"I don't like the parrot very much. There is some sort of button on top of it and I don't like that. It is hard and that's stupid. I want something smooth."*

IV. The companions from a child's perspective

2. Secureness and warmth

The children place their sensual experience with the companion in a context. For example, 5-year-old Julian relates: *"Then I cuddle up really close to him, so that I don't get any nightmares."*

5-year-old Giulio describes how his companion Elchi helps him to deal with scary television programmes.

From the interview:

G.: *This programme comes on where I always get frightened, and then he protects me.*

Int.: *What programme is that, then?*

G.: *Tintin.*

Int.: *And then you get frightened?*

G.: *Um. (Agreement).*

Int.: *And Elchi always watches the programme with you?*

G.: *Um. (Agreement).*

Int.: *And what does he do then?*

G.: *He protects me.*

Int.: *And how does he do that?*

G.: *He just cuddles me.*

The tactile experience of "cuddlability" provides security and helps with the negotiation of emotionally upsetting situations. From an outsider's perspective the criticism could be made as to why a child who is obviously frightened by a programme is allowed to watch it. This is certainly a justified observation. However, from the point of view of the child's development this is nevertheless a thoroughly important step, because with or without television the child is going to encounter feelings of tension, and it is the individual's task to learn to cope with such feelings. The companion becomes an emotional support, who helps the child to tolerate these new, emotionally upsetting areas and deal with them.



Favourite cuddly toys or dolls help the children to withstand situations fraught with anxiety, for example whenever the parents are not at home. 4-year-old Alissa, for example, reports how her doll once helped her: *"She kept a lookout to make sure that no-one came in when she was home alone, without daddy and mummy ... she also kept a lookout in the night. Then we could sleep, that was on holiday."* In the 4-year-old's expressions it is clear to what extent the doll has been given a personality and serves as a screen for the projection of one's own feelings, since "she" was home alone.



IV. The companions from a child's perspective

3. Emotional mirror and anchor

In the children's statements it is noticeable how the favourite cuddly toys or dolls very much reflect their own feelings, or intermingle with their own emotional world. 5-year-old Ebru, for example, reports of her cuddly rabbit Hexe that she must be with her at all costs, *"when I stay all on my own ... Because once I stayed in all on my own and then she had to cry"*.

The companion becomes a screen for the projection of one's own emotional states, which in this way can be articulated and thus become capable of management.

"I need him to play with ... and so that I'm all right and so that I'm not so alone ... Always when it's Friday or Monday or Tuesday ... because my mummy and daddy don't play with me. Then I just have to take my Pluto."

(Nadine, 5 years)



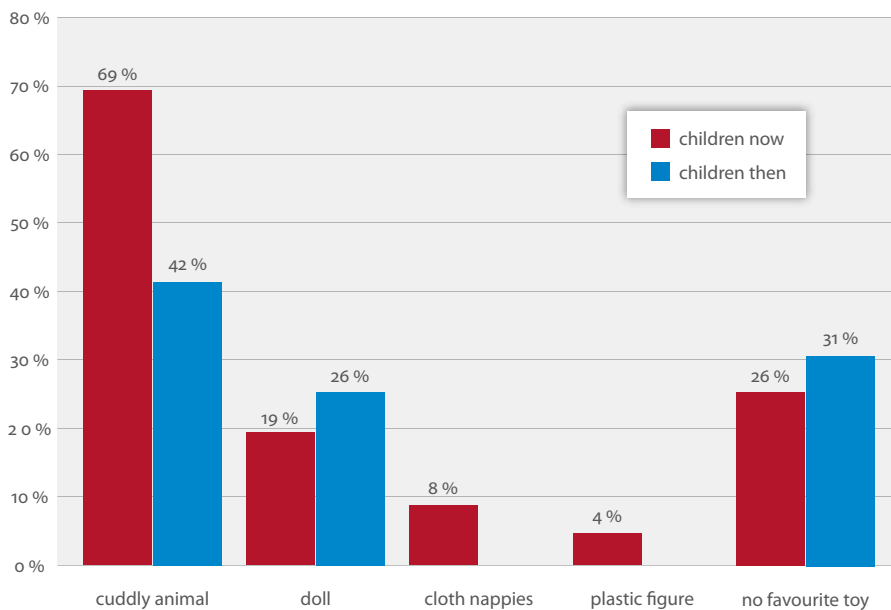
Something which parents cannot see, and which once again only emerges with clarity through the children's statements, is the significance of companions as reliable partners in a relationship which conforms to the child's mental state particularly when no-one else is present or has time for them. Cuddly toys are there when children feel that they have been left alone, they give them a firm footing and function as conversation partners, and in this way contribute in no small measure to their powers of psychological resistance.

For children the companion has been given a personality and is quasi alive. Intuitively, they attribute feelings and a personal will to the toy. In actual fact, however, they establish an imagined relationship ("para-social relationship"), which enables the kid to experience and constitute him/herself. This self-involved moment distinguishes the favourite companion from other cuddly toys or dolls. 3-year-old Benno, for example, clearly distinguishes his companion, his cuddly dog Lumpi, from other cuddly toys: *"I play with all my toys. But only Lumpi accompanies me everywhere I go, and he wants to be involved in everything I do."*

V. Companions then and now

1. Texture

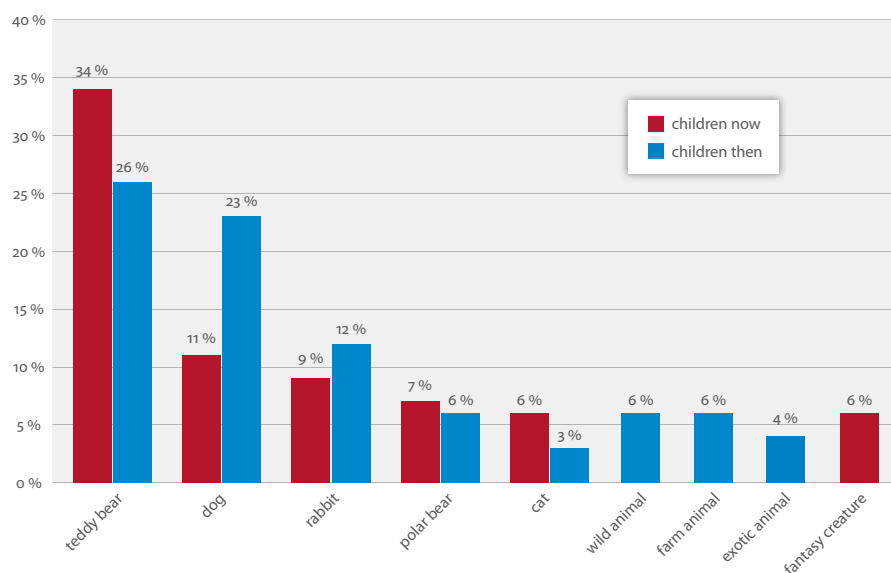
In 2007 the “Chances for Children through Play” Foundation conducted a survey of 1,000 men and women aged between 16 and 69 about the dolls and cuddly toys of their childhood.¹¹ This permits a cautious comparison, at least, with the results of the survey of mothers regarding the companions of their children between the ages of 1 and 6.



Companions were and are important for children

Whether it takes the form of a doll, teddy, or cuddly animal, a companion was and is an important part of childhood in Germany. 85% of the 16- to 69-year-olds grew up with their own cuddly toys or dolls. Over two-thirds even remember having one “main” companion. Roughly half the adults who had an important childhood companion of this kind still possess it today.

Companions in cross-generational comparison



Then as now, the teddy bear is high on the list

In former times too, teddies, dogs, and rabbits were among the most popular cuddly toys. In the cross-generational comparison, the significance of the teddy as companion has grown, while furry companions such as wild animals or farm animals nowadays hardly play any role among today’s children; instead their place is now taken by more fantastic creatures.

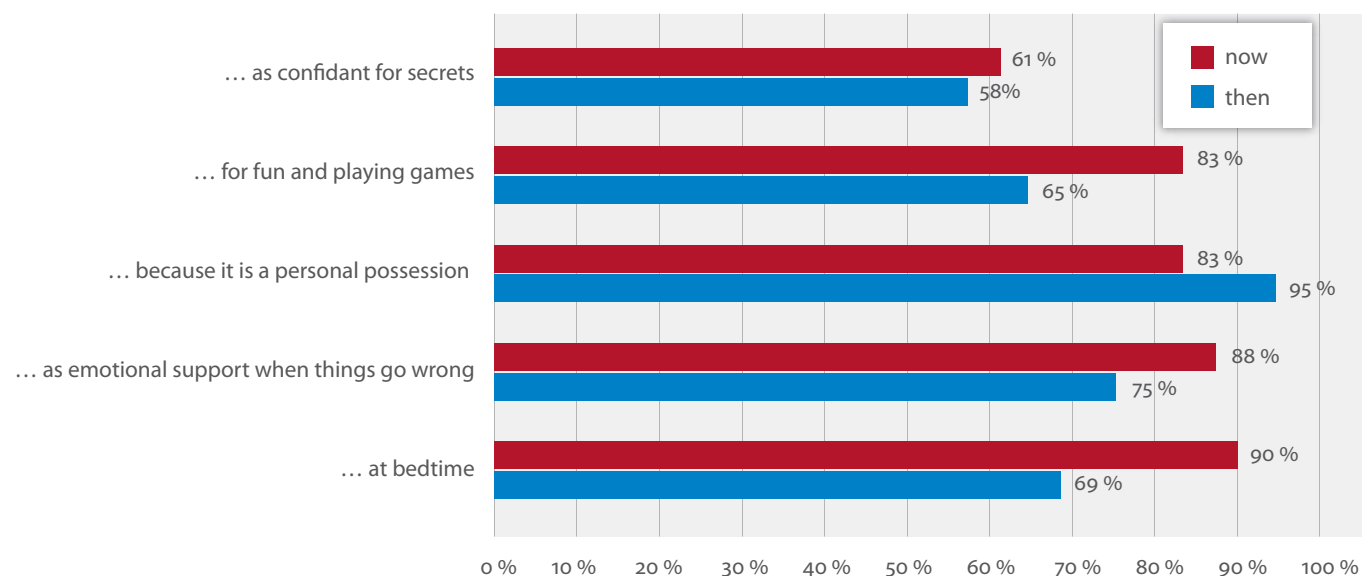
Cross-generational comparison, favourite types of cuddly toy

¹¹ Source: Stiftung “Chancen für Kinder durch Spielen” (“Chances for Children through Play” Foundation) (ed.): Grundlagen-Untersuchung Puppen – Teddys – Stofftiere in der Kindheit. (“Basic Investigation: dolls, teddies, and cuddly toys in childhood”)

V. Companions then and now

2. Functions

Today's adults also remember that they had dolls, teddies, and cuddly toys in their childhood, and that these had a great emotional significance.



Cross-generational comparison: functions of companions¹²

(Top 2 boxes: respondents who agree fully and completely, or as far as possible, with the relevant statement)

There have been increases, for example, in the significance of the favourite cuddly toy as companion at bedtime or when things are not going so well for children. One possible reason for this is that – thanks to improved, softer materials – the utility and “cuddlability” factors of today’s companions have significantly increased. Earlier hinged or ceramic dolls were mostly, from a material point of view, significantly less suited for going to sleep in one’s arm or being tightly squeezed when children felt unwell. In earlier times, the companions were less often employed as playmates too, at least in memory. Here too one might presume that the present-day furry animals and dolls can be played with more often and more easily.

However one function which did possess more significance in earlier times, at least in memory, was the fact that the companions were personal possessions. Almost all the 16- to 69-year-olds surveyed remembered that their favourite was something that belonged solely to them and was something quite their own. Considering the context of the furnishing of children’s rooms today, and the way in which it is self-understood that even young children are entitled to possessions (from music boxes to various toys), this is easy enough to understand.

The companions of childhood were important for the two previous generations, and even today have lost none of their power.

¹² Now: 708 mothers with children between the ages of 1 and 6, surveyed 2009 (with respect to their children)
Then: 1,000 men and women between the ages of 16 and 69, surveyed 2007 (with respect to their childhood)

VI. Summary

In Germany, three out of four children have at least one companion. Moreover every fourth 1- to 6-year-old directs its affection towards a single, quite specific, favourite cuddly toy or doll. For the most part, these companions have already been selected in the first three years of life. Boys mostly decide for cuddly animals, girls – from their third birthday – also choose favourite dolls.

Teddy bears are among the most popular cuddly toys for children in Germany, followed by dogs and rabbits. In the cross-generational comparison, too, the teddy was the most frequent companion, but this frequency has risen even further among today's children. Equally, in comparison with earlier generations a shift towards furry or plush companions may be observed, whose material nature is more suited to cuddling and play.

Here a typical sign of quality in cuddly toys and dolls becomes an opportunity for children's play. Thanks to their material nature, with its specific tactile qualities, they lend themselves not only to play, but above all also to the provision of sensual moments, which can be experienced in quite concrete form. In the negotiation of everyday life, the companions communicate security, support, shelter, and comfort to children, and can always be relied upon to be present as emotional crutch. Favourite cuddly toys and dolls mostly possess a symbolic charge, a kind of invisible, resonating significance. From the children's perspective they possess "souls" and have quite specific abilities, qualities, or needs which the children ascribe to them.

Besides fulfilling the emotional functions of a companion, in everyday life there are various situations in which favourite cuddly toys and dolls act as playmates. They are purposefully deployed by children in make-believe play, in which they understand and further develop things they have undergone and experienced. Companions relive situations which the child itself has experienced as their surrogate, engage vicariously with developmental tasks, everyday problems, or desires, are cared for in imaginary games, or take on a role prescribed by the child in fantasy games or role-plays. Companions are multifunctional. Favourite cuddly toys and dolls are for the most part voyagers between realities (in play), and are employed by the children in versatile ways. For this reason, they must be as suitable as possible companions for coping with everyday life and self-healing, and as creative as possible playmates for processes of engagement with ego, self, and society. Additionally the companions possess functionality not only for the person to whom they belong, but also for others, and thus can serve as a kind of communicator and mediator between parent and child.



VII. Tips for parents

1. Companions and your child's psyche (Psychological dimension)

Companions are important: allow and encourage your child to bond with them and give them a "soul"

Children need emotional bonding – best of all, with their parents. This gives security and the confidence to engage with the world. Companions are so-called transitional objects, which give emotional security. They form part of the child's self-healing powers when situations become difficult, and help with the construction of identity.

⇒ Encourage your child to bond with the companion and give it a "soul"!

Just play along with them! Give a cuddly toy a "soul" yourself, make it talk, and offer your child a common space for communication.

Companions are part of your child's individuality

Favourite cuddly toys and dolls are more than just material objects for children. Often they carry a high emotional charge and are companions in coping with everyday life and processing experience, as well as in the assimilation of rules.

⇒ Be sensitive when giving feedback!

If you denigrate the cuddly toy, by doing so you also damage the child. If you denigrate the child's love for its cuddly toy, by doing so you also denigrate its emotional world.

Every child is different

The relationship towards cuddly toys and dolls differs from child to child. Many have one or more companions, some however have none. There is no "better" or "worse" here.

⇒ Be happy with the way your child is!



VII. Tips for parents

2. What makes a good companion? (Material dimension)

Safe, practicable, and robust for years on end

Companions should obviously be free from hazardous substances and dangerous components, or (especially for the very smallest children) lint-free.

Companions should be as versatile as possible in their material composition: cuddly for bedtime, sturdy enough for days out, flexible enough for games, etc.

In addition, they must withstand a great deal – they often become dirty and have to put up with a lot of stroking, squeezing, and travelling. A childhood companion is washed over 100 times, handled and played with over 1,000 times...

⇒ Look out for quality material and workmanship!

Scope for fantasy

Childhood companions should offer various stimuli for self-rediscovery and play. For this purpose specific qualities such as a friendly face or a “play-friendly” head and body are important. A teddy bear’s bodily form resembles that of a human being and invites one to clothe it, a dog with its four legs invites one to take it by a leash or attach a cart to it, etc. Stimuli are needed for these various possible forms of use, but so is free scope for the imagination. If everything is already differentiated and predefined – clothes, crown, hairstyle, accessories, etc. – this certainly appeals to children, but they can only play with it on their own initiative to a qualified extent.

⇒ Make sure that everything isn’t already predetermined!

Be aware of accompanying values

Your child’s companion “embodies” something in its presentation, material, and references (e.g. a TV programme). Dolls have a skin colour, cuddly toys make reference to specific types of animal, characters to specific programmes, etc. The Barbie doll “embodies” an idealised woman. This has positive aspects (appreciation of women, beauty, etc.), but also problematic ones (wasp-like physique, stereotypical beauty, materialistic standards).

⇒ Be consciously aware of these values!



VII. Tips for parents

3. What parents can do (Educational dimension)

Show understanding and give recognition

Educational activity should always incorporate the child's perspective. With good intentions in mind, attempt to understand what your child uses its cuddly animals and toys for, and whether/when it is searching for one or more companions.

⇒ Look at things from your child's perspective!

Practical tip:

Just sit down in a corner with a coffee in a quiet moment, and (inconspicuously) watch your child at play.

Less is more

Companions become invested with "souls" and emotionally charged by children. This, however, cannot happen with as many dolls or cuddly toys as the child likes. Nowadays potential companions are not just available in specialist shops, but often for low prices in supermarkets, furniture stores, petrol stations, etc. As such they are suitable as occasional souvenirs and small presents. But often you are doing your child no favour if it has a vast number of cuddly toys sitting in the corner.

⇒ Don't let the number of cuddly toys and dolls in your child's room grow indefinitely!

Practical tip:

With younger children (up to ca 3-4 years), the unwanted and never used cuddly toys and dolls can disappear into the cellar. Then they're still available in case of doubt. Later on you can, together with your children, sort out cuddly toys that are not used frequently.

Tastes differ – and can be trained

Just as with food, children often have different tastes from adults in aesthetic matters as well. Pink, glitter, a gaudy red figure with long fangs – all these things appeal to one child or another in a specific phase of its search for identity. For the most part this is precisely what the market offers, and in vast quantities. To a certain extent you should simply accept this. Your child has a right to its own taste. At the same time, aesthetic feeling can also be cultivated, and it is your task to offer your child, from time to time, something different from what the market offers so plentifully.

⇒ Give your child the chance to have different aesthetic experiences!

Practical tip:

With infants in particular you have a good chance to make something attractive for them if you emphasise what you find particularly nice about this toy. With preschool children or schoolchildren, for the most part this will only succeed if you also recognise and appreciate their taste, and then offer several alternatives.



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