

Received: one child, with blanket

My daughter, like a lot of little children, has a blanket. At 6, she's discreet about it, but it's still there when it needs to be.

It arrived with no particular ritual. At her birth it was just another little gift, a thoughtful gesture from distant friends of my in-laws. It was really nothing special. No embroidered fancy-work, no intricate crocheting, no imported Scottish wool. Just a storebought quilted synthetic. In blue.

But it had a nice feel to it, cool and gentle, like the pleasant caress on your face when you burrow into a fresh pillowcase. So I decided to get involved with this blanket. I'd swaddle my new, first baby in it. It seemed a safe and appropriate thing for a father to do.

The blanket, Amy and I became involved the first week of her life. Nervously, we all got acquainted. When this strange, tiny creature came home from the hospital, I swaddled her. Actually, I meticulously tucked the blanket around her, in the manner of someone wrapping a borrowed piece of Waterford crystal.

It was awkward. I wasn't sure what to do with the blanket. Actually, I wasn't sure what to do with the little creature.

Naturally, the blue synthetic wasn't a big hit right off. Its utility was questionable. I found out, as new parents do in the earliest hours, that this wondrous alien clearly preferred the warmth of my chest as she burrowed against me in the night's stillness. And, as new parents pleasantly discover, the bundle radiated back.

To this, a blanket is superfluous.

Still, I pushed it. It was something I understood. Its intended function was clear: warmth first, security second.

Blankets are good for children. This blanket could give her warmth. It could protect her. It would comfort her. It would make her feel safe, secure. It would be her talisman, her shield against all the horrors and uncertainties of a world that I was at a loss explain. I wanted her to take to that blanket. I needed her to, because I had.

With time, Amy and the blanket



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became inseparable. She swaddled herself in it. She balled it up into a pillow, savored its coolness. It was the suitcase that bundled her belongings for journeys to imaginable lands. It was her royal cloak, worn for ruling obedient subjects - or her cape, essential to the supernatural powers she needed to thrash terrible villains.

More important, it was there, pressing against her face, to soak up the tears of hurt that an older person is helpless to lessen or, sometimes, even to understand.

With age, the blanket started to wear. At first the tattered areas were carefully sewn by hand. As it threatened to shred again, I patched and re-quilted it

with a sewing machine. Finally to stop it from completely disintegrating, I sewed a new piece of material over one hole side of the gradually disappearing original.

To my relief, Amy found the new material acceptable. As tatters from the old blanket unraveled from the new backing, I scooped them up like rare family jewels, storing them in a strong box I use for valuable photographic negatives. I told Amy maybe someday we would sew them all back together, and I asked her to give me even the smallest remnant for safekeeping.

The blanket, now affectionately dubbed "Raggy," stopped being carried to her day-care center last year. This year, as kindergarten began, the blanket stayed home while Princess Leia, Strawberry Shortcake or, lately, Annie made the trip instead.

On the one hand, I'm glad, because as long as it's home, the blanket won't be lost as this creature becomes increasingly more difficult to carry asleep to bed. On the other hand, her lessening need for the blanket makes me uncomfortable . . . a little sad . . . and even at moments, afraid.

But the raggedy blanket is hers. It is there, waiting, when she comes home in the afternoon. If Amy lies down on the couch, blanket under her head, as she gently and quietly rubs the fabric between her fingers, you realize even a 6-year-old can have a tough day out there.

We share the blanket at 6:30, sitting together on the couch watching the TV news. (Lately, as we watch the report on the day's carnage, she has increasingly been asking, "Why?")

At night, she hugs it closely and drifts off to sleep.

I hope she leaves the blanket for me when she goes off to college.

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