



It's Hard to Smile with a Binky in Your Mouth

DECADES AGO, when I answered a lifelong calling to education, it was unheard of for infants and toddlers to be cared for in structured, formal programs. Call them what you want—neighborhood centers, day care, child home care, or whatever! These days, no one blinks at 6-week-old newly-borns launching their early education journeys in a rehabbed church basement classroom or a ready-for-action, state-of-the-art, brag-about new facility.

True, many of our very youngest children adapt easily to a program of any label or variety when met by loving, warm, joyful, trustworthy caregivers and teachers. But even with stellar staff members and ideal learning environments, some very young children take separation from home painfully. I'm sure you know a few children who challenge you to constantly reassure them, create a safe and loving community, and share delightful, developmentally appropriate activities.

And even with those qualities strongly in place, you know that nothing seems to diminish their weepy, clingy, hesitant, and fearful behavior.



For example, meet a few 2s. **Shelley**, Binky in the mouth, will not move without her “blankie”—worn, torn, and draped or fastened around her body. It is her life jacket.

Franklin wears his baseball cap, insists on having his backpack forever on his back, and always clenches his Binky in his teeth. When his class comes into my joyful, musical, bouncy space, he is in his teacher's arms, tears rolling down his cheeks, holding on for dear life. **Brianna**, with a pink Binky and blankie, makes a fashion statement of color coordination. But make no mistake, even to the casual bypasser, these objects of attachment make another clear statement.

A little background

Since September, I have welcomed seven sessions a week of children, from infants/toddlers to “senior citizen” kids—those know-

everything 4-year-olds and smarty-pants pre-Ks. I am the dancing, movement, musical, playful teacher who has enjoyed almost all of the children eagerly running, skipping, and giggling to my smiley room. Almost all! But, let's focus on Shelley, Franklin, and Brianna. Binkies in mouths, backpacks on backs, blankies in hands, these three toddlers have been consistently nonparticipatory for months. They are like small clouds of glumness in a swirl of cheerful, playful jumping beans.

Sometimes my beloved brown and white puppy puppet, Snowball, is the welcomer. He sits against the wall and watches the action-filled sessions. At the end of our time together, he distributes kisses to every child. It's always a love fest with teachers, assistant teachers, children, and yours truly enjoying the fun of being together. Every ordinary moment is special!

Mimi Brodsky Chenfeld, now in her 53rd year in education, continues being with teachers, families, and children of all ages throughout the country. Born in New York City, Mimi celebrates more than three decades of living in Columbus, Ohio, and working at the early childhood program of the Leo Yassenoff Jewish Center. The Binky story happened there! Her numerous articles, stories, poems, and books are widely read—the latest, *Celebrating Young Children and Their Teachers: The Mimi Brodsky Chenfeld Reader*.

A lovely day in May

Yes, you may note, it's May. Today it is nine months since the school year began in September! We have danced, sung, laughed together through these many weeks. Even our shyest children soon learned that ours is a safe and joyful place to be.

Even our most hesitant holdouts, Shelley, Franklin, and Brianna, felt the love permeating our shared times. Somehow, the relentless warmth must have helped melt layers of inhibition and fear. Or was it osmosis? Could it be the continuous bombardment of consistent fun shared through the months? We checked every textbook for answers and found no formula for such situations. The closest wisdom discovered were words on a poster from an anonymous source. The words said, "Whatever the question, the answer is love."

Today is very special. It's that kind of day in the life of those of us who spend time hanging around young children. This crazy field of early childhood education yields many rewards—most not obvious to the general public. Regular civilians would not recognize the many tiny miracles that happen every day, which surprise and astonish us—miracles like today!

What happened today?

Brianna, Franklin, and Shelley's class bounced into my room, ready for dancing, ready for fun. When I saw Shelley's worn blankie and Brianna's fashion-pink one, something possessed me to kneel down and ask, "Friends, Snowball is cold today. Do you think you could let him sit with your blankies?"

The blankie girls looked hard at Snowball, who was wagging his ears merrily, thought a minute, and with great courage nodded their heads and handed over their blankies. Just like that! It was hard to hide my astonishment.

We who call ourselves early childhood professionals know those moments. They inspire yelps of release, tears of success, and cheers of undescribed victory that must be stifled. For we must respond in ordinary, undramatic, everyday ways with "Thanks, dear friends. Snowball will be warm now that you have shared your blankies."

On this day, however, such an event called for a special celebration. "Let's have a parade!" Children love parades, for any or all causes or reasons, or for no reason.

"We'll need clowns, musicians, and animals in our parade," I suggested. "It's such a beautiful spring day. Let's have a fun parade!" I didn't even look at Franklin, Brianna, and Shelley when I said, "Wouldn't it be fun to shout Hooray! and be sure to smile and wave at everyone? Gosh, if you have a Binky in your mouth, it will be hard to smile. Any of you with a Binky in your mouth can put it carefully

on the blankets with Snowball. He'll watch them for you. We'll wait for you before the parade starts."

Looking deeply into one another's eyes, our Binky trio of children, one by one, removed Binkies from their mouths (an almost surgical procedure), walked slowly to the blankie-safe Snowball, and carefully set down their precious, well-moistened possessions.

Trying not to faint...

We teachers began the parade. This time there were three true reasons to cheer! Every one of those 2-year-olds were singing, waving, galloping, and jumping in a parade of delight—smiles on every face. If you came into our room that day and saw the scene, you would never know that three of the children had not moved this way in all nine months. I suspect that even our veteran brown and white puppy Snowball was grinning, seeing the immensity of the drama unfolding before him. No passerby could know that one of those many miracles that happens in early childhood teaching was happening then and there.

Months of constant, consistent, and unswerving fun, love, and reassurance must be part of the answer to whatever the question. We are still working at understanding the underlying reasons for such a moment of change on this wonderful day in May. Guaranteed formulas are not to be found! Perhaps the biggest lesson learned is that *it's hard to smile with a Binky in your mouth.*

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