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**a dad's view**

# For the love of a stuffed animal

By William Tiernan  
WNC Parent contributor



Children love stuffed animals. They cuddle with them, play with them, sing to them, feed them, and inject personality (and forks) into them.

Stuffed animals often serve as a child's first set of friends and the foundation for a more complex social world of communication and collaboration.

My 3-year-old daughter Sophia has amassed a nice collection. She calls them her "babies." As a toddler she relied on them for comfort, clutching a cat or duck after a head bump or a bad dream. But recently the dynamic changed. Sophia now lords over her stuffed animals, and a hierarchal arrangement has developed within the menagerie. Babies with insipid personalities or incurable injuries ("Martin" the elephant recently got "detruckitated") form the lower class. They live in Sophia's baby cradle, trapped like crabs in a bucket with little hope for advancement. The middle class exists on the periphery, living comfortable if not exceptional lives on bookshelves and in closets. The elite are members of Sophia's entourage. They enjoy her full attention and have reasonable access to entertainment, education, medical care, travel ... and BLING!

The elite babies are comprised of loyal canines, a handful of misfits, and brand new stuffed animals that arrive weekly in the mail from Sophia's grandmothers. The current group: a tiny Golden Retriever ("Baby Bones"), a



midsize Golden Retriever ("Mamma Bones"), a life-size Golden Retriever ("Big Bones"), an Akita ("Rainbow"), a brown and white mutt ("Puddles"), a black cat ("Ditsy"), a wolf ("Aiesha"), a lamb ("Jeremy Boy"), and a pink dragon with golden wings ("Scary Guy!").

Sophia tends diligently to these babies. She arranges them on blankets for story time, rubs their paws, adorns them with jewelry and stickers, and patches their "injuries" with Band-Aids. She's also firm with them. She scolds them when they stray under beds and punishes egregious mistakes. A few weeks ago Puddles walked too close to the oven. Sophia banished him to "time-out" for 10 minutes. The dog hasn't been near the kitchen since.

Sophia insists an elite baby accom-

pany her when we go to the store or the park. Sometimes it takes her 10 minutes to choose. When she (finally!) decides, I place a check mark in that baby's box on a master spreadsheet posted near the door. This working document highlights any favoritism; Sophia knows, literally, who is being left behind.

Sophia makes a point to introduce her traveling babies to strangers ("This is Baby Bones, he's nice to meet you.") and may indulge them with licks of ice cream or rides on the swing. But she's concerned more for their security than their social experience. All babies must look both ways before crossing the street, stay close to her in stores, and wear seat belts while riding in shopping carts. (Big Bones has to buckle up in the car!) A few weeks ago Sophia left Puddles in Barnes and Noble. Panic! "We go get him! We go get him!" she pleaded, until the dog was recovered.

As I watch Sophia tend to her babies I realize her parenting centers on three things: education, discipline and protection. That's all she cares about really: that her babies are literate (or at the very least good listeners); that they behave; and that they're safe and accounted for. Being fairly new parents ourselves, my wife and I might be well-served to take a page from Sophia's playbook. Sure, we do our best in the keep-up-with-your-neighbor climate. Last year we bought a safer car; we make sure Sophia has nice clothes and shoes and a cool lunchbox; and we attend her music performances at preschool and take the obligatory pictures and videos. As she grows older we'll sign Sophia up for singing lessons, or buy her the latest tennis racket or spring for the expensive SAT class. Because all the support in the world might help her secure a spot in the school play or on the high school tennis team or in the class of 2019 at College X, Y or Z.

But the other night, as I watched Sophia wrap Mamma Bones in her sleeping blanket, it hit me: Wanting the world for my daughter is all fine and good. But literate, well-behaved, and safely tucked in her bed at night? On most days these will be more than enough for me.

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