

## Are baby dolls and soft toy animals good for people living with dementia?



### **Yes — and here's why they can be especially powerful during sundowning**

This is one of those topics that people often feel nervous to ask, even when they have seen it work with their own eyes: *Are baby dolls good for people living with dementia?* Some families worry it might feel insulting. Some worry it could look unprofessional. And many people simply don't know whether it is genuinely helpful, or whether it crosses a line. The truth is that when this is approached correctly, the answer is often yes. Not because the person is “childlike”, and not because we are trying to distract them from their reality, but because dementia changes the way the brain regulates emotion, safety, and comfort. Sometimes, when words reduce, comfort becomes the language.

This becomes especially important during sundowning. Many families recognise the pattern: the day has been manageable, and then late afternoon arrives and everything shifts. The person becomes more restless, more anxious, more unsettled. Sometimes they pace, refuse support, call out repeatedly, become tearful or angry, or seem unable to settle no matter what you try. Sundowning is not “bad behaviour.” It is often the nervous system trying to find safety when the brain is running out of capacity. That is why the most helpful question is rarely “How do we stop this?” and more often “What does the nervous system need right now?” At Launex, we do not treat distress as something to silence. We treat it as something to understand.

From lived experience in real care environments, there is also a pattern that many people recognise, even though it is not universal or fixed. Dolls often connect most strongly with women, while soft toy animals often connect more naturally with men, particularly during sundowning when the nervous system needs to settle. With women, a baby doll can trigger a deep sense of emotional familiarity. Many women will hold it like a baby, look at it with adoration, rock it gently, talk to it, soothe it, and become calmer in a way that is difficult to

achieve through words alone. It can appear as though they are reliving a time from the past when their own children were young, not necessarily in a confused or random way, but in a way that shows how emotional memory remains powerful even when logical processing fades.

This is where people misunderstand doll therapy. It does not work simply because it is a doll. It works because it activates something meaningful in the person's identity. When you offer a responsibility that the person strongly connects with from their own life experience, such as "Will you hold the baby for me?", it can be as if the maternal instinct system switches on and runs on autopilot. In that moment, fear and restlessness can fall into the background because a deeper, more regulating emotion takes the lead. Love, purpose, tenderness, and protection begin to override distress because the brain has found a role that still makes sense. It is not childishness. It is regulation through meaning.

The same principle often applies to men when you offer a soft toy animal, particularly one that feels like a dog. During sundowning, when agitation or restlessness is building and nothing seems to land, a soft animal can become an anchor. If you ask them something simple like, "Will you feed the dog his dinner?" using pretend food, it is remarkable how often everything else falls away. The distress loosens, the pacing slows, the facial expression softens, and the person engages with calm purpose. It is the same joy and steadiness that women often find with dolls, just in a different form. Again, it is not the object itself. It is what the object represents — familiarity, companionship, responsibility, and emotional safety.

This kind of support only works when it is person-led. A doll or soft toy animal should never be forced into someone's arms or used as a tool to "manage" them. It must never be used to control a person or to silence their distress. The safest approach is always gentle and respectful: place it nearby and allow the person to choose whether they engage. If they connect with it naturally, you will see it instantly. If they reject it, remove it quietly and without making it a "thing." Person-led care means the person chooses what comforts them, even if it looks unusual to someone watching from the outside.

The deeper truth is this: comfort is not childish. Comfort is neurological. Dementia often removes access to the thinking brain first, but it does not remove the need for reassurance, attachment, purpose, and safety. In fact, that need often becomes louder as cognitive capacity reduces. So when a doll calms a woman during sundowning, or a soft animal calms a man in distress, that is not regression. That is a nervous system being met in the language it can still understand. And when we respond to that correctly, behaviour often settles — not because the person has been controlled, but because they have been understood. Behaviour is not noise. Behaviour is a language.

What often gets missed is that this kind of response only works when you understand *why* it works — and when to stop. Without that understanding, families are left guessing, second-guessing, and sometimes being judged for getting it wrong."

This is exactly the kind of moment we unpack step-by-step in our Dementia Care & Understanding course with families and carers — so support doesn't turn into trial and error.

If you are beginning to notice these changes and want to understand what is happening step-by-step, you can request the Launex Family Pathway Guide here:

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