

Children's imaginary companions: Dispelling myths and rumors

Imaginary companions are often portrayed in media as signs of social-emotional disturbance or, at the least, immature behavior. In films such as *The Shining* and *The Sixth Sense*, and in TV shows such as *The Whispers*, to name just a few examples, imaginary companions are frightening. They tend to either make the child do something bad or be a sign of mental illness.

Partly due to this negative portrayal in pop culture, parents and teachers often find imaginary companions disconcerting. Adults get uncomfortable when an imaginary companion comes out to play during daily routines (requiring an extra place setting at lunch time, for example) or when the imaginary companion causes disruptions (blaming the pretend friend for breaking rules, for example). Adults also worry that engaging in this type of play might be harmful to the child and that they should not accept or adapt to it.

Much research, however, indicates that the presence of imaginary companions is quite common and can actually be beneficial to children's development.

Why do children create imaginary companions?

An imaginary companion is typically described as an invisible character a child names and keeps for three months or so (Svendsen 1934). The child may talk about the pretend friend with other children or adults, and may play with the character. Although completely pretend, the imaginary companion seems very real to the child, "You sat on Steffie! She's sitting in that chair!"

More recent research expands this description to include dolls or stuffed animals, if the child treats them as if they are alive and gives them a relatively stable personality (like Winnie the Pooh or Hobbes in the comic strip *Calvin and Hobbes*) (Gleason and Kalpidou 2014; Taylor 1999).

Although estimates vary across the literature, likely because of these different descriptions, approximately one-third to one-half of children—and possibly more—between the ages of 3 and 12 create imaginary companions (Pearson, Rouse, Doswell, Ainsworth, Dawson, Simms, Edwards, and Falconbridge 2001; Singer and Singer 1990; Taylor 1999). Research has indicated that these imaginary friendships are quite similar to real friendships in that they are often multidimensional (Gleason and Kalpidou 2014; McInnis, Pierucci, and Gilpin 2013). It is not uncommon for children to experience ups and downs and differences of opinion with their pretend friends, just as they do in their real friendships.

Imaginary companions can serve numerous purposes, depending upon the needs of the child who creates them. Taylor (1999) asserts that the two primary purposes are fun and companionship. Imaginary companions, like Dr. Seuss' *Cat in the Hat* character, are often amusingly outlandish, are not



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necessarily logical nor have stable personalities, and often change based on the various impulses of their creators.

Other reasons for creating imaginary companions include reducing feelings of loneliness, neglect, and rejection, as well as alleviating the stress of painful situations (Nagera 1969). For example, an imaginary companion may appear during difficult family changes such as a parental divorce or death of a loved one.

Moreover, research has documented that only and firstborn children are somewhat more likely to create imaginary companions (Manosevitz, Prentice, and Wilson 1973). When playmates are readily available, there is less need to invent one. Finally, research also suggests that imaginary companions allow children to practice managing their emotions, ultimately helping them develop control and mastery (Bretherton 1989; Hoffman and Russ 2012). Indeed, a child's imagination is a safe environment that permits, and often encourages, creative expression of a variety of emotions.

What are the benefits of having an imaginary companion?

In addition to their commonality, imaginary companions are associated with many positive traits. Research findings reveal that, in comparison to other children, those having imaginary companions:

- have increased emotion understanding (Lindeke and Kavanaugh 2007);

- have increased cooperativeness with peers and adults (Singer and Singer 1990);
- have increased perspective-taking skills (Taylor and Carlson 1997);
- use more mature language (Bouldin, Bavin, and Pratt 2002);
- tell richer narratives (stories), a skill that has been linked to reading success and school achievement (Trionfi and Reese 2009);
- are rated as more outgoing by parents (Roby and Kidd 2008);
- are just as able to distinguish between fantasy and reality (Taylor, Cartwright, and Carlson 1993);
- have just as many mutual friendships (Gleason 2004);
- are rated as better communicators with adults by parents (Manosevitz, Prentice, and Wilson 1973); and
- do not have more behavior problems (Manosevitz, Prentice, and Wilson 1973).

Given these many benefits, teachers might wonder if they should worry about children who don't have an imaginary companion. To be clear, not having a pretend friend is perfectly OK. Research has indicated that some children simply tend to engage more in various types of pretend play (like creating an imaginary companion) than in more realistic play (like sports) (Gilpin, Brown, and Pierucci 2015). Children who do not have imaginary companions likely engage in other sorts of healthy pretend play (like sociodramatic play) and realistic play.

How should teachers respond to imaginary companions?

Generally speaking, it is up to the child's teachers and parents to decide how much attention to give to the imaginary companion. Some teachers might feel comfortable indulging the fantasy by setting an extra plate at lunch time and not sitting in a chair occupied by an imaginary companion. Others may not want to take it that far, and that is OK, too.

A good rule of thumb is to follow the child's lead. If requests or demands become too unreasonable, you might respond with firm but gentle reminders that everyone (imaginary or not) has to follow the same rules. Avoid trying to control the imaginary companion. Because the companion stems from the child's own imagination, going down this path will often lead to more frustration.



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Given the benefits of having an imaginary companion, and pretend play in general, teachers would do well to encourage children's active imaginations. You might simply talk positively about pretend play. Books and movies can stimulate conversation about pretend play naturally and inspire children's imaginations. Fortunately, imaginary companions have been treated more positively in books and film recently. One example is an excellent storybook *Imaginary Fred* by Eoin Colfer and Oliver Jeffers. Disney/Pixar's latest blockbuster, *Inside Out*, features an imaginary companion affectionately named Bing Bong, who is made up of mostly cotton candy and is part cat, elephant, and dolphin.

Additionally, you can encourage pretend play by having children come up with various play scripts to act out (pretending to be underwater sea animals, or going to the moon and interacting with space creatures, for example).

In the art center, you can invite children to draw pictures for the imaginary companion (or a fictional character, if the child does not have one). Or you can encourage children to create a house or play space.

Consider inviting an imaginary person or pet to visit the classroom, and let each student share in creating and embellishing the interaction.

Of course, we cannot forget that a wide variety of new and often simple real-life experiences, such as field trips to museums, libraries, recreation centers, and parks, can stimulate the imagination by suggesting new play themes. Visits to the doctor or dentist

as well as shopping at the grocery store can provide role models to explore.

In teacher-parent conferences and parent meetings, teachers can allay parents' concerns about the effect of pretend friends on their children. Inform parents about the way you handle imaginary friends in the classroom, and encourage parents to take advantage of similar opportunities at home.

Respect and encourage

In all cases, teachers can respect a child's need or desire to create an imaginary companion. Pretend friends are common in young children and should not be cause for ridicule or disparagement. Actually, having an imaginary companion can be beneficial to a child's growth and well-being. Above all, teachers and parents can stimulate children's imagination and encourage the development of positive relationships, real or imaginary.

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About the author

Melissa McInnis Brown, Ph.D., is an assistant professor of early childhood development and education in the Department of Family Sciences at Texas Woman's University in Denton, Texas. She teaches classes in child development, research methodology, and statistics. Her research focuses on children's engagement in pretend play and how it might benefit cognitive and social development during the pre-school years. ■