

The Imaginary Friend

MH explores why children invent imaginary friends and what purposes these fantasy figures serve for the developing child. Here are some tips on how best to respond to your child's relationship with their imaginary friends.

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According to psychology Professor Marjorie Taylor, at least 65 per cent of children younger than seven invent imaginary friends. These friends can be invisible or take the form of a stuffed toy or doll. In some instances, these imagined companions become part of the home environment for years, while others get replaced by new ones after a few weeks.

Why do Children Invent Imaginary Friends?

Imaginary friends are the result of a child's naturally curious and creative mind. They usually come into being during a child's preschool years, when the little one starts to engage in more complex types of pretend play. Before delving into the benefits of creating imaginary friends, let's consider two common myths:

Myth: Imaginary friends are a sign your child has emotional problems.

Truth: Imaginary friends are usually a sign that the youngster is having fun and being imaginative.

Taylor conducted research on childhood imaginary friends and assures parents that children don't invent imaginary friends because they have social or emotional problems. Instead, her research shows that children who have imaginary friends are generally better at social relationships than those without imaginary companions. These children laugh and smile more, are more outgoing, and have more real-life friends. They are also more able to see things from another child's perspective. Contrary to conventional misconceptions, your child's invented companion is actually a sign of an active, healthy imagination.

Myth: Only children who confuse reality and fantasy have imaginary friends.

Truth: Children with imaginary friends know they aren't real.

It's not unusual for children to get emotionally caught up in their pretend play with imaginary friends, but this doesn't mean they have lost touch with reality. It is similar to the experience adults have when they become intensely emotionally involved with events or characters in movies or books. Children know their invented friends aren't real, even when they adamantly state their imaginary friend sometimes misbehaves, doesn't always want to share things, or talks too much! Indeed, this is behaviour that they may be experiencing from their peers or siblings and are using their imaginary friends to find the best way to cope.

The Benefits of Imaginary Friends

Children create imaginary companions because they benefit from these fantasies in a number of ways:

Pretend play

Maturing preschoolers take part in pretend play as a normal and healthy part of development. It gives them an opportunity to rehearse and try out social roles they see in the world around them. It also provides them with a safe environment to work through and process the many emotions they experience on a daily basis. A child may adopt the role of an authority figure by making demands on their imaginary friend. How the imaginary friend responds can be a source of insight into how your child relates to and understands issues about control, authority, and possibly conflict. Pretend play is a fun and imaginative tool children use to make sense of the world and their place in it. It's also a means through which they can express their developing understanding, thoughts, and feelings about events in their lives.

Emotional support

Children often invent imaginary friends to help them process challenging emotions or cope with traumatic experiences. During pretend play it's not uncommon for a child to place their imaginary companion in an uncertain or anxiety-provoking situation, and then to take care of them through soothing, empathic reassurance. Imaginary friends are great companions to help children deal with the anxieties and uncertainties of life, such as when the family moves, or when children have to enter a new school environment. Other scenarios can include the arrival of a new baby or when parents get divorced. Children can become more attached



to imaginary friends during these events and this intensified relationship is often a sign that your child needs to be reassured in some way.

Increased control

Your child has total control over their companion, unlike with real childhood friends. For this reason, your child's imaginary friend presents the little one with a safe opportunity to compensate for the feelings of powerlessness they can experience in the world of adults. Adults dominate children's lives at home, at school, and on the playground. With imaginary friends always available your child is the one making all the decisions for a change and gets to determine what they will be doing, when, for how long, and who should and shouldn't be invited. The sense of power, control, and competence children experience in these fictitious relationships are crucial for their social development.

Social and emotional development

Social psychologist Susan Newman refers to research which shows that children with imaginary companions automatically stimulate their own social and emotional growth.

They tend to have broader, richer and better vocabularies – developed through talk with their invented companions. They are also less bored and know how to entertain themselves when other playmates aren't around. Research suggests there is a degree of maturity in their play when compared with classmates who have no invented companions.


Cognitive development


Children with imaginary friends engage in self-talk, which develops their cognitive abilities.

Self-talk precedes and encourages internalised thought, which is a crucial cognitive component necessary for problem-solving and other critical thinking skills. This means that children, through pretend play and talking with imaginary friends, develop these skills faster than children who don't play with imagined friends. Self-talk eventually develops into silent thought, which underlies and strengthens the child's ability to engage in more complex cognitive tasks.


How to Relate to Your Child with an Imaginary Friend


Try not to worry unnecessarily when your child spends time with an imaginary friend. Here are some tips on how to relate to your child with their imaginary companion:


 Relax and enjoy the experience. You will be surprised how much you can find out about your little one's interests and concerns when you ask questions about their relationship with their imaginary friend.


 Don't discourage your child's pretend play, but do observe it. If the fabricated relationship becomes disruptive in the home or threatens your child's safety then you should set limits. For example, if the imaginary friend gets blamed for making a mess, encourage your child to take responsibility for it. Try to not bring the imaginary friend into the picture unless your

child insists that their invisible companion is to blame. In such instances, ask both of them to clean up and suggest that both take responsibility for keeping their space clean.

 Respect your child's inventions and don't try to take over, unless you have good reasons for interfering. You can, on occasion, ask about the imaginary friend, or attempt to talk to them in your child's presence. However, allow your child to be in charge of the relationship with the fantasy friend. Undue interference from your side might spark conflict, anger, or provoke unnecessary power struggles with your child.

 Don't worry when imaginary friends share your child's life for a while. It's not uncommon for these make-believe companions to hang around for at least three years before they disappear. Some children beyond pre-school age keep one or two around just for fun. When your child is ready to say goodbye to their imaginary friends, they will do so,

 Your child might involve you in doing things for their imaginary friend such as setting the table for them or holding the door open for them. It's a good idea to play along, but instead of doing things for the imaginary friend, encourage your child to do these things themselves. This is one way of developing your little one's social skills in a way that's fun and engaging.

 If your child completely avoids interaction with real friends and exclusively plays with his imaginary friends, then it may be cause for concern. In this instance it is best to seek professional counsel because the chances are high that underlying emotional issues are getting the better of your child.

If your child is happy and interacts with his peers then there is no need to worry. The best thing you can do for your child is to pay attention to their play and enjoy the glimpses they allow you into their fantasy world. 