



by Karen Stephens

Imaginary Friends: A Fun, Helpful, and Normal Part of Childhood

Having an imaginary friend during childhood is common. Most times children play alone with them, but peers sometimes play, too. And it's not unusual for imaginary friends to be included in family routines.

The play a child experiences with an imaginary friend is different from children acting out characters featured in children's entertainment media. Movie or cartoon characters created by someone else might be a starting point for fantasy, but true imaginary friends come from a child's own mind. The imaginary friend's traits, emotions, and conversation all spring from children's own perceptions, experiences, and wishes.

With a few cultural exceptions, children the world over enjoy imaginary friends. It's estimated between 25 and 45% of three to seven year olds create imaginary playmates. For most children, the friends are invisible, but some take the form of a doll, stuffed animal, or toy, such as a truck or airplane.

Having an imaginary friend peaks among preschoolers, but is still common among pre-teens. On average boys tends to create imaginary friends a bit later than girls.

Boys also differ somewhat in their approach to imaginary playmates. Boys often "become" the friend — taking on an alter ego. Their pretend friends are often bigger, stronger, and older, with greater competence and power.

Girls are more likely to create a fantasy friend separate from themselves. Girls' imaginary playmates are often "younger" and need more nurturing, such as needing help reaching a goal or facing physical challenges.

Some children have just one imaginary friend that stays for years. Others enjoy a succession of different friends who might last only a day. And some children — especially school-agers — create many imaginary friends at once and develop elaborate communities or worlds where the friends live together.

Imaginary friends "leave" or cease to exist for a variety of reasons. Some kids just grow out of them. For some, parent or peer disapproval pressures them to forsake the play. And for others, an imaginary friend may leave when the child no longer needs them for comfort or support — such as during a stressful new experience or transition.

Characteristics of Children with Imaginary Friends

Research has given us a portrait of children who enjoy creating imaginary friends. Some of the myths that once labeled these children as emotionally damaged or "social misfits" have — thankfully — been dispelled.

Below are characteristics these children commonly share. They tend to be:

- emotionally well-adjusted;
- intellectually skilled, but not necessarily of higher IQ;

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- outgoing and social, not typically shy, isolated or withdrawn;
- advanced in understanding of social relationships;
- verbally skilled;
- able to take others' perspectives to create complex play themes;
- able to focus on an idea and maintain good attention span;
- creative, but not significantly more creative than others;
- more self-directed during unstructured time, preferring to play rather than watch television; and,
- able to enjoy fantasy play while also grasping the difference between “real and pretend” (exceptions being when cultures actively encourage children to suspend disbelief of magical beings such as Santa Claus or Tooth Fairies).

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Why Children Create Imaginary Friends

Children say they create imaginary friends for the pure and simple fun of it; they love the fantasy. These children enjoy social interaction, so if an actual playmate isn't available, they create one.

There are other benefits to the play, too. Imaginary friends give children a sense of control, since they rarely disagree or refuse to play. Children's feelings can be managed by assigning them to the friend or seeking the friend's comfort. Children sense unconditional love from imaginary friends and confide secret worries to them without fear of judgment, punishment, or abandonment.

It's very handy for a child to have a “scapegoat” to blame for minor mishaps. But more often, imaginary friends help children cope with events. For instance, children “rehearse” an anxious scenario with an imaginary friend to prepare for the event, such as adjusting to going to the dentist or flying on an airplane.

And though it's *not* a sign of abuse in itself, children who have suffered neglect or abuse often create an imaginary friend as a confidant. Also, if an important relationship is missing in a child's life, such as parent divorce or death, some children create a “pretend” person to stand in for the relationship as they gradually accept reality.

Responding to Children's Imaginary Friends

It's really up to adults to decide how much attention to give a child's imaginary friends. Some parents love the fantasy play; others find it boring or “childish.” Children read an adult's body language very well, so don't pretend to enjoy “playing along” if you don't. Casually let children go on about their play without your participation.

If the spirit moves you, by all means enjoy imaginary friend play with your child. Time spent together, a few props, and space to play are contributions you can make. By following your child's lead, you can gain interesting insights to their thoughts, emotions, and relationships.

Many children like to use art supplies to draw pictures for invisible friends, or create houses and play spaces for them. If you provide supplies geared to your child's age and abilities, such as cardboard boxes, fabrics, glue, colors or markers, play becomes engaging and detailed.

Often whole families respond to the imaginary friend. The friend gets a seat at the dinner table or is “buckled” into a car seat before going to child care. Some families are even sad when imaginary friends are outgrown.

Whatever your approach to imaginary friends, it's important to be respectful of your child's need for one. Ridiculing, teasing, or belittling children for creating a friend isn't productive or kind. No one, including siblings, should name-call the child using negative labels.

When disciplining, avoid taking advantage of your child's fantasy friend. Don't trick or coerce a child by threatening to "run off" a friend if the child doesn't obey. Trust and respect for authority weaken if parents manipulate children *through* an imaginary friend. For instance, if you expect your child to take a bite of food, say so. Issues become mixed up if you say, "Your friend likes trying it, why don't you?"

Rule of thumb: If the imaginary friend's behavior stems from your imagination, not your child's, you're manipulating rather than playing. When nerves are frayed, manipulation is a tempting strategy, but not a constructive one. Keep discipline and play separate.

When Imaginary Friends Should be a Concern

A child having an imaginary friend in itself isn't cause for worry. But there are situations when an imaginary friend, *along with additional factors*, can indicate problems needing help. Such factors include, but are not limited to:

- child has no friends or interest in them
- child engages in violent, hurtful behavior and blames it on the friend
- child appears fearful of the friend and complains it won't go away
- child shows signs of physical, sexual, or emotional abuse.

Childhood with special imaginary friends is a fascinating topic. Parents and early childhood professionals wanting to explore the topic deeper can turn to the book *Imaginary companions and the children who create them* by Marjorie Taylor (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999).

About the Author — Karen Stephens is director of Illinois State University Child Care Center and instructor in child development for the ISU Family and Consumer Sciences Department. For nine years she wrote a weekly parenting column in her local newspaper. Karen has authored early care and education books and is a frequent contributor to *Exchange*.