

Imaginary Friends and Companions: Information for Caregivers



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Summary: Imaginary friends and companions are a normal experience for most children, and are not a sign of mental illness or problems. Studies confirm that children with imaginary friends tend to be imaginative, better at seeing other's perspectives, and better able to entertain themselves. They tend to grow up to be creative, imaginative, social adults.

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Aisha's Story

Aisha is a 5-yo girl with an imaginary friend named "Monkey". "Monkey" is her stuffed animal, which happens to be a monkey. Aisha began talking to her stuffed animal after the start of COVID quarantine. Parents appreciated Jenny as they both worked long hours. Aisha would say, "I'm off to play with Monkey now", and then go off for half an hour and talk out loud with Monkey.

Aisha will:

- ... insist that parents wait for Jenny before leaving the home;
- ... insist that parents serve dinner to Jenny;
- ... tell elaborate stories about what Monkey has done, including bad things.

The other day however, Aisha appeared to be arguing with Monkey, which led parents to become worried -- there is a family history of schizophrenia.

What do you think?

Introduction

What is an imaginary friend?

An imaginary companion or friend is "an invisible character, named and referred to in conversation with other persons or played with directly for a period of time, at least several months, having an air of reality for the child but no apparent objective basis" (Svendsen, 1934).

Imaginary friends are common and normal for many kids:

- By age 7, 65% of children will have had an imaginary friend at some point in their life (Carlson, 1993)
- It is common with 28% of preschoolers and 31% of the school-age youngsters
- The main age is between ages 3-11 (Carlson, 2004).
- A quarter of the time (27%) of the time, parents do not even know about them (Carlson, 1993).
- Many children report more than one, with a range of 1-13 different entities (Carlson, 1993.)

Examples of imaginary companions include:

- Boys and girls and other humans (57% of the time)
- Animals (41% of the time), including stuffed animals. The child may have an existing stuffed animal and treat it as if it has its own unique personality (such as with "Hobbes" in the comic strip, Calvin and Hobbes).
- Toys.

Gender differences

- Girls tend to be more likely to have imaginary friends than boys (Carlson, 1993);
- Little girls typically take on a nurturing, teacher-like role with their imaginary companions, who often take the form of baby animals or baby humans (Carlson, 1993)
- Little boys' imaginary friends are frequently characters who are more competent than they are, such as superheroes or beings with powers (Carlson, 1993)

Most of the time they are nice, and can help with coping. But sometimes, children report their imaginary friend is a nuisance, and may even have arguments with their friend (Carlson, 1993).

Why Do Kids Have Imaginary Companions?

In order to have an imaginary friend, a child needs to have enough 'social intelligence' and "theory of mind", which is the understanding that other people have different thoughts/feelings than you, also known as "theory of mind". This usually starts around age 4-5. Before developing their "theory of mind", young children do not understand that other people can have different thoughts or wants than them.

Imaginary companions can be very helpful in meeting various needs such as:

- Need to feel competent: When the child has a leadership, protective or expert role with an imaginary companion, it allows them to feel competent.
- Need to be in control: It also helps the child be in control, and practice social situations with no risk. A child can practice different scenarios with their imaginary companion, in a safer way than with a real-world friend.
- Need for friendship and connection: The fact that they are more common in only children, or the eldest children, suggest it may help these children feel connected and deal with loneliness.

Studies of preschoolers with imaginary friends have shown that:

- Those children tend to be more imaginative,
- Have richer and fuller vocabularies,
- Better able to entertain themselves.
- Better at seeing other's perspectives.

What Happens With Imaginary Companions? Will My Child Grow Out Of It?

What happens to kids who have imaginary friends?

- Kids with imaginary friends tend to grow up to be more creative than those who do not (Carlson, 1993)

What happens to imaginary friends?

- The imaginary companion is replaced with a different one;
- The child develops real life friendships and activities that meet the same needs of the imaginary companion.
- The imaginary companion fades away, in the same way that children might lose interest in other activities or interests;

Most children grow out of their imaginary friend by age 11 (Carlson, 1993).

Nonetheless, there are adults who continue to have imaginary friends. As long as the imaginary friend is a positive, helpful experience, there is no reason to be worried.

The writer Agatha Christie talked about having imaginary friends into adulthood.

Similar to an imaginary friend, is the concept of a “tulpa” in adults. Originally described in Buddhist cultures, the “tulpa” is a type of imaginary friend that is willed into existence by an adult through intense meditation. A tulpa has its own thoughts and feelings, and is distinct from the person who has created it. People with “tulpas” describe them as being helpful and encouraging in real-life situations (Luhmann, 2013).

Are Imaginary Friends a Sign of Mental Illness?

Imaginary companions are normal for most children and thus, are not a sign of mental illness or concern. Imaginary companions are NOT the same as schizophrenia, psychosis or having dissociative identity disorder or multiple personalities.

There is no evidence that having imaginary companions increases a child’s risk of later mental health problems.

Imaginary Friends	Hallucinations	Schizophrenia
67% of children will have had an imaginary friend in their life	5-15% of people report having auditory hallucinations, i.e. hearing voices.	<1% of the population will develop schizophrenia
Positive imaginary companions can be helpful for coping with stress	Hallucinations can be positive, though sometimes negative.	Symptoms will be more than just hallucinations -- there may be: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Hallucinations • Delusions • Disorganization and unable to function in life.
	Most people with hallucinations do not go on to develop schizophrenia	

When To See a Health Professional?

Consider seeing a health professional if:

- The child’s imaginary friends are becoming a significant problem, such as
- When the demands of the imaginary friend are excessive and inappropriate, and cause stress for the family.
 - Serving an extra plate with imaginary food is fine, but serving a whole dinner is not good.
 - Waiting a few moments for the imaginary friend is fine, but being late as a result is not good.
- When the child blames the imaginary friend for their own misbehaviours. The imaginary friend should not be a way for the child to escape their consequences -- the child should understand that they are still responsible for their imaginary friend’s behaviours.
- When the child prefers their imaginary friend to the real world. If so, then it would be important to explore what it is that makes the child want to avoid the real world, e.g. bullying, anxiety?
- The child is having symptoms of other conditions that might be worrisome such as hallucinations (seeing or hearing things that is causing distress) and/or delusions (strong beliefs unfounded in reality, e.g. believing that s/he is being spied on, or being poisoned, etc.)

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For More Information

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Authors

Written by the health professionals at CHEO and eMentalHealth.ca.

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