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Imaginary friends

Around one in four children under the age of five has an imaginary friend at some point – a pretend pal who they can conjure up whenever they want. We take a look at why

Do not be surprised if one day a child in your setting insists that you leave an empty chair in the circle at story time for their friend to sit there – and then you discover that their 'friend' only exists in their imagination! Some pre-school children have several imaginary friends. There have even been recorded instances of children as young as two playing with a friend that only they can see and hear. Researchers have found huge variety in the types of imaginary mates, ranging from fictitious animals to make-believe children.

Did you know...?

- Psychologists do not know for sure why some children have imaginary friends and others do not. There is no predictable pattern. It used to be thought that the presence of a pretend playmate was a sign of loneliness, but children with lots of friends and siblings are as likely to have an imaginary pal as an only child.
- An imaginary friend serves many different psychological purposes, depending on the individual child. For example, it can help a child to release their angry feelings. If they scream at their brother, they would be severely reprimanded, but if they scream at the friend that only they can see, their parents probably laugh and think it is amusing.
- Sometimes an imaginary friend helps a child to develop a 'can-do' attitude. The prospect of a new challenge in the setting might make them tremble. Yet, a few helpful comments from their imaginary supporter may lift their self-belief and enthusiasm enough to enable them to face the demanding task head on. It is a form of positive self-talk.



The manipulative dimension

Although a pre-school child most typically engages with their imaginary friend as a harmless form of imaginative play – similar to dressing-up play or role play – they can also use this psychological phenomenon in a manipulative way.

In order to avoid an activity that the child dislikes in the setting, for example, they might claim that they will not join in because their friend is too shy, or they cannot tidy up the book corner because their friend is hurt and needs to be looked after. In other words, they use the imaginary friend to ensure that they get their own way. It is still a game as far as they are concerned and they still know that the friend does not really exist, but they want to use their playmate to control those around them.

When faced with that situation in the nursery, the best way to deal with it is to react firmly but in a non-confrontational manner. While showing sympathy for the imaginary friend's difficulties, make it clear to the child that they will have to complete the task in front of the friend even though the friend is apparently indisposed.

The child might also use their imaginary friend to deflect blame. What better way to absolve themselves of responsibility for the missing chocolate biscuit than to accuse their pretend playmate! Since you cannot see the friend, you cannot claim that they had nothing to do with it. Try not to laugh at the child's ingenuity in these circumstances as that will only encourage them to do the same again the next time they find themselves in hot water.

- A child with an imaginary friend is well aware that their pal is a flight of fancy – they do not confuse reality with fantasy, no matter how much they fuss when you accidentally tread on their friend's foot. It is a type of game, a healthy expression of their imaginative skills, that is all. Under pressure, they will admit, of course, that the friend is not really there.
- Although parents sometimes fear that having an imaginary friend is a sign that their child has limited understanding, studies have shown that a bright and alert child is as likely to have an imaginary friend as is any other child. In fact, some psychologists claim that they really have to be advanced in their thinking skills and in their use of imagination to create a fictitious figure.
- Boys tend to invent imaginary superheroes who are amazingly strong and skilled, and who succeed at anything they try – they usually describe their pal's exploits in wonder. In contrast, girls tend to have imaginary friends who are vulnerable and who need to be looked after.

5 top tips

for managing imaginary friends

1 Don't be alarmed Remember that in virtually every instance, the appearance of an imaginary friend is perfectly normal. Reassure the child's parents too, as they may be worried that it signifies a deep-rooted problem. The chances are that the friend vanishes as quickly as it appears, probably around the time that the child starts school.

2 Respect the child's play choices You would not make fun of the child or interfere with their game if they chose to play in the dressing-up corner, so treat their use of the imaginary friend in the same way. They have fun playing like this, and it helps them psychologically in some way, even though you may not fully understand why.

3 Set some ground rules Harmless enjoyment or not, you have a setting to run and you cannot start reorganising groups so that the child's imaginary friend can have their own seat, nor can you start

buying in additional food for an extra mouth to feed! Feel free to tell the child that on this occasion their imaginary friend will have to fend for himself.

4 Encourage other play A child thrives best when they engage in all sorts of play, including physical play, social play, cooperative play, play with games and puzzles, and language play. Too much involvement in one particular form of play can restrict their opportunities. Therefore it is good to also involve them in other activities that do not rely on their imagination.

5 Keep an eye on the child If you find that the child's imaginary pal starts to play a very dominant role in their life, that it is with them all day long, then have a long chat with the child's parents. A child's extreme reliance on their imaginary friend could be a sign of a deeper, underlying worry that causes them considerable concern. ■

