Imaginary Companions
Pretending They Are Real
but Knowing They Are Not

•

Marjorie Taylor and Candice M. Mottweiler

Parents and child specialists are often concerned about the role imaginary companions play in children's lives. Recent research shows that the creation of an imaginary companion is a common and healthy type of pretend play. There are many different kinds of imaginary companions, including those based on various types of props as well those that are invisible. Although children describe many imaginary companions as kind and obedient, others they depict as disruptive and unruly. When children express strong emotion for imaginary companions or claim to have difficulty controlling the companion, they may appear confused about the boundary between fantasy and reality. However, the authors argue to the contrary: Most children are very clear in their understanding that their imaginary companions are pretend. Taylor and Mottweiler base their claim partly upon spontaneous statements of children they interviewed concerning the fantasy status of imaginary companions.

HUMAN BEINGS HAVE a unique capacity to love, share our lives, and even bare our souls to imaginary others. Imaginary others can take many forms, including imaginary versions of real people, fictional characters from books, and invented people or animals custom designed to meet the particular needs of their creator. Most imaginary companions—characters we create and interact with and talk about on a regular basis—turn out to be invisible. Sometimes animations of toys or other objects take on such a life as well. Indeed, almost any sort of object can serve as the incarnation for an imaginary other, as illustrated in the movie *Castaway*, which showed a close relationship between a man who was marooned on an uninhabited island and a volleyball named Wilson.

But the capacity to invent and become attached to imaginary others does not require a lengthy history of social relationships or extensive experience with interpersonal interactions. Children as young as two or three talk to their stuffed animals and listen to what they have to say. And when a child creates a

personality for a toy or invents an invisible friend to serve as a special friend, that child is engaging in a basic human urge. We choose to call this invented character an "imaginary companion," a term we think more appropriate than the "imaginary playmate" sometimes referred to by others.

While the creation of an imaginary companion constitutes only one of the many forms fantasy production takes during a child's preschool years, it may well have special significance. In *The Work of the Imagination*, Paul L. Harris describes how imagining the thoughts, actions, and emotions of another person or creature provides a context in which children encounter and manipulate multiple perspectives, providing practice for real-life simulations of other people's points of view.[1] According to Tracy R. Gleason and Lisa M. Hohmann, children explore the possibilities of social interaction in their play with imaginary companions in a way that helps to develop their concept of friendship.[2] In recent years, there has been a surge of interest in children's imaginary companions and what they might reveal about cognitive and social development.[3]

In this article, we describe some of the findings of our research investigating this type of pretend play. In particular, we address the question of whether or not children understand that their imaginary companions are just pretend, a question not much studied outside the work conducted in our laboratory. Our conclusions are consistent with Harris's claim that children's pretend play demonstrates their knowledge of reality, rather than confusion about it.

Imaginary Companions Are Healthy and Common

In the past, parents, psychologists, and other professionals have often taken a dim view of children's preoccupation with imaginary others. In particular, parents—unsure whether this type of pretending is healthy—have not always welcomed imaginary companions. They worry about what having an imaginary companion means for a child and wonder what role a parent should play in guiding this type of fantasy, including whether they should discourage it. Does a child's involvement with imaginary companions suggest that he or she is having difficulty making friends? Does it mean he or she can not distinguish fantasy from reality? Even more dire, does it mean their child might be at risk for psychological disorders?

The stereotype of the child with an imaginary companion tends to be a shy, withdrawn child, with some emotional problems, who needs to make some real friends. This negative image may owe something to the fact that children do

indeed sometimes use imaginary companions to cope with problems. After all, the imagination is a powerful coping resource available to them. Children can walk confidently past a scary dog when there is an invisible tiger at their side; they can talk to an imaginary friend about traumatic events involving family members and know that their secrets are safe. However, pretending to have an imaginary companion occurs more often because it is fun than because a child is in emotional distress. In groundbreaking research discussed in *The House of Make Believe*, Dorothy G. Singer and Jerome L. Singer showed that children who create pretend friends tend to be sociable and enjoy interacting with others.[4] Research in our lab at the University of Oregon and elsewhere supports this view, showing that having an imaginary companion tends to be associated with positive characteristics such as advanced social understanding, as well as being less shy and more outgoing than other children.[5]

Not only is having an imaginary companion healthy, it is also quite a common type of pretend play. Exactly how common depends upon what we call imaginary companions (are they only invisible friends or can they be special stuffed animals like Christopher Robin's Winnie the Pooh?) and where the information about them comes from (are our sources parents, or children, or adults who remember childhood imaginary companions?). If we consider all cases of imaginary companions created by children up to the age of seven, about 65 percent of children have them; if we only include invisible friends and exclude the ones based on toys, the number drops to 37 percent. In any case, playing with imaginary companions remains clearly a common activity for young children.

What Are Imaginary Companions Like?

For almost two decades we have interviewed hundreds of children, parents, and other adults about the creation of imaginary companions. Our main method is to observe children playing in our lab, conduct separate interviews with children and parents, compare their responses, and then resolve discrepancies by asking follow-up questions. One limitation of our research is that our participants have been from primarily Euro-American, middle-class backgrounds. Nevertheless, the diversity in the descriptions we have collected is enormous.

The animals and people who populate children's fantasy lives differ in their vividness, their personality development, and the extent to which they have some basis in the real world. Some imaginary companions are stable and long-

lived, and children play with them regularly, whereas others have a much more transitory existence, drifting in and out of a child's fantasy life. In our research, we have encountered children whose lives were crowded with imaginary people and animals, none of which lingered for very long. Other children had only one or two imaginary companions at a time but updated their friends frequently. Still other children maintained the same pretend friends for several years.

Sometimes children use real world objects as props or vehicles for imaginary companions. We have interviewed children who made special friends out of dolls, out of a wide range of different types of stuffed animals (bears, rabbits, frogs, dogs, monkeys, Muppets, kangaroos, dinosaurs, hedgehogs, cows, tigers, horses, dolphins, Smurfs, Tasmanian devils, cats, donkeys, squirrels, and moose), out of reflections in a mirror, out of their own fingers, or out of the leaves on a tree. However, more commonly, imaginary companions are invisible. Some of these invisible friends are regular sorts of girls and boys who function as good playmates. Children seem to have clear mental images of what these friends look like and how they behave. They have no difficulty drawing pictures of them and describing their personalities. For example, they might include details such as the imaginary companion being funny, making them laugh, and being a good companion (e.g., "we always know what the other one is going to say"). Some of the imaginary companions have characteristics that take them out of the realm of what might be expected of a real child playmate. For example, some have special capabilities such as being able to fly, fight crocodiles, or perform magic. Others have unusual physical characteristics, like being very small (e.g., "Baintor," a very small invisible boy who is completely white and lives in the white light of a lamp). Although many are about the same age as the child imagining them, some are infants and have to be cared for (e.g., "Cream," a tiny invisible baby who lives on the child's hand) and some are very old (e.g., "Nobby," a 160-year-old invisible businessman who visited the child between business trips to Portland and Seattle, whenever the child wanted to "talk things over").

Many imaginary companions are animals, frequently with human characteristics such as the ability to talk. Some animal friends are further embellished with magical powers (e.g., a cat that flies) or special characteristics (e.g., superior intelligence). For example, one five-year-old girl described her friend "Dipper" as an invisible flying dolphin who lived on a star, never slept, and was "very, very, very, very fast." He was "about the size of a regular dolphin, but covered with stars and all kinds of shiny stuff." Our sample includes a wide range of species—cows, dogs, tigers, turtles, dinosaurs, mice, cats, giraffes, horses, ponies, lions, elephants, monkeys, dolphins, unicorns, bears, fleas, ducks, opossums,

panthers, unicorns, and rats. We have also interviewed children with imaginary companions that were ghosts, angels, twin siblings, a Cyclops, and some other unique creatures—"Humpty Dumpty's mother": an invisible talking egg with spiky hair, a big round egg-like head, and a human body.

When adults think about the attractions of having an imaginary companion, they tend to focus on the joys of having a friend who is always supportive and helpful and consistently loving, one who agrees with what you say, does what you want, keeps your secrets, and provides good company. It seems reasonable to assume that a made-up friend would not suffer from the moodiness, stubbornness, and other flaws of real friends. However, descriptions of imaginary companions often include pretend friends who are disobedient, bossy, argumentative, and unpredictable. They come and go on their own schedule rather than according to the child's wishes, and they do not always want to play what the child wants to play. They talk too loudly, do not share, or do not do as they are told. They can also be a real nuisance. As one child told us, "She hits me on the head and puts yogurt in my hair."

Do Children Think That Their Imaginary Companions Are Real?

Children's complaints about their imaginary companions raise some fascinating questions. For example, children's difficulty controlling their imaginary companions, combined with their strong emotional attachments to them, could be interpreted as suggesting that children are confused about the boundary between fantasy and reality. However, research suggests that children are actually quite adept in making the distinction between what is real and what is not. Although they often become emotionally caught up in their pretend play, this is not unlike the adult tendency to respond emotionally to movies, books, and other types of fantasy material. For this reason, researchers such as Harris and Jacqueline D. Woolley have argued against the interpretation of emotional responses to fantasy as evidence of fantasy/reality confusion. Little existing work addresses this issue in the specific case of imaginary companions, but in our view, children are well aware that their imaginary companions are pretend.[6] We base this opinion mainly on children's spontaneous references to the fantasy status of the imaginary companions during our interviews. For example, when asked where their friends live, children pointed to their heads or said "in my imagination." Some children emphasize their authorship of the

characteristics of the friend (e.g., "I can pretend he's whatever I want him to be"). Statements like these can be found in response to almost any of the questions in our interview. Here are some more examples:

When you want to play with (friend's name), how do you get him/her to show up?

"Sometimes I call George in my imagination and he just says 'coming' in my imagination." (five-year-old girl)

"I just imagination." (four-year-old girl)

"I just make him show up." (five-year-old girl)

"She does not talk because she's not a real baby." (four-year-old girl)

"She is really not real, just a funny play bear." (five-year-old girl)

"I think about her and then I just start playing with her as soon as she shows up." (five-year-old girl)

How did you meet (friend's name)?

"I didn't. I made it up." (four-year-old girl)

"I just made him up in my head." (five-year-old boy)

"She's just my imaginary friend." (five-year-old girl)

"It's just pretend." (five-year-old girl)

"Her is a fake animal." (four-year-old girl)

"It's really just because it's pretend." (four-year-old girl)

"In one of my dreams." (five-year-old girl)

"In my imagination." (four-year-old girl)

"He's not in real life." (four-year-old boy)

"I found out the way to go to Sillyland and that's how I met her." (four-year-old girl; this child later explained that Sillyland is "where all my pretend friends live.")

Where is he/she when he/she is not with you?

"She pretends that she's real by herself and with her parents and with her brother and with her pet." (four-year-old girl)

"He goes into my head." (five-year-old boy)

"I pretend they're real but they're not." (four-year-old girl)

"He goes in my mind and the world in my mind is called Neoland, I mean Pokemon Land; I have two lands in my mind." (five-year-old boy)

About 40 percent of our interviews contain such spontaneous remarks. Even when children do not use the term "pretend friend" to refer to their companion, the pretend status is frequently acknowledged up front, as illustrated in the following exchange with a five-year-old girl:

Adult: Do you have a pretend friend?
Child: No . . . well, I only have my house ghost.
Adult: Your house ghost. Is your house ghost pretend or real?
Child: Pretend.
Adult: Does your house ghost have a name?
Child: George.
Adult: And is George a stuffed animal or a doll or is George completely
    pretend?
Child: He's just pretend.
Adult: He's invisible?
Child: Yeah.
Adult: Okay. And is George a person, an animal, or something else?
Child: He's just a house ghost.

Although these types of comments are quite common, not every child makes them, so we have also carefully examined the transcripts of interviews for any indications that the children were confused about the pretend status of their imaginary companions. In a study of eighty-six children with invisible friends, one child did seem to think her imaginary companion was real and two more children were a little unclear ("Sometimes he turns real and he talks real so everybody can hear him."). These few cases stood out in marked contrast to the other eighty-three children (97 percent) who showed no indication of any confusion. Overall, we are struck not only by how much children enjoy and are engaged with their imaginary companions but also by how firmly they understand that their friends are pretend.

Conclusion

The creation of an imaginary companion is a healthy and common type of pretend play, one particularly intriguing to parents, educators, and psychologists. There is considerable variability in the types of friends that children invent, some invisible, and some based on props such as favorite toys. Children invent

idiosyncratic details and stories about their imaginary companions that they are typically happy to share. At times, the content of the fantasy or the child's emotional absorption indicates a child may be confused about what is real and what is not. However, children responding to questions about their imaginary companions often made explicit their ability to distinguish between fantasy and reality. The same child who tells an interviewer about a bossy talkative elephant that the child claims to be able to see and hear, will quite likely, in the next breath, smile at the researcher and remind her that it is all just pretend.

Notes

1. Paul L. Harris, *The Work of the Imagination* (2000).

2. Tracy R. Gleason and Lisa M. Hohmann, "Concepts of Real and Imaginary Friendships in Early Childhood," *Social Development*, 15 (2006), 128–44.

3. Paula Bouldin, "An Investigation of the Fantasy Predisposition and Fantasy Style of Children with Imaginary Companions," *The Journal of Genetic Psychology*, 167 (2006), 17–29; Charles Fernyhough, Kirsten Bland, Elizabeth Meins, and Max Coltheart, "Imaginary Companions and Young Children's Responses to Ambiguous Auditory Stimuli: Implications for Typical and Atypical Development," *Journal of Child Psychology and Psychiatry and Allied Disciplines*, 48 (2007), 1094–1101; Tracy R. Gleason, "Social Provisions of Real and Imaginary Relationships in Early Childhood," *Developmental Psychology*, 38 (2002), 979–92; Eva V. Hoff, "A Friend Living Inside Me—The Forms and Functions of Imaginary Companions," *Imagination, Cognition and Personality*, 24 (2005), 151–89; Marjorie Taylor, *Imaginary Companions and the Children Who Create Them* (1999).

4. Dorothy G. Singer and Jerome L. Singer, *The House of Make-Believe: Children's Play and the Developing Imagination* (1990).

5. Marjorie Taylor and Stephanie M. Carlson, "The Relation Between Individual Differences in Fantasy and Theory of Mind," *Child Development,* 68 (1997), 436–55; Martin Manosevitz, Norman Prentice, and Frances Wilson, "Individual and Family Correlates of Imaginary Companions in Preschool Children," *Developmental Psychology,* 8 (1973), 72–79; Alison B. Shawber and Marjorie Taylor, "Invisible Friends, Personified Objects, and Pretend Identities: Children Who Create These Imaginary Characters Are Less Shy Than Other Children." Manuscript under review.

6. Jacqueline D. Woolley, "Thinking about Fantasy: Are Children Fundamentally Different Thinkers and Believers from Adults?," *Child Development*, 68 (1997), 991–1011.