

*Imaginary Companions
and the Children
Who Create Them*



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To my mother Edith, Doug, and Amber

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1

Introduction



IMAGINARY companions often get bad press. In movies and novels, they tend to be equated with psychological disturbance. Look what happens to Danny Torrance, the child character in the movie based on Stephen King's novel *The Shining*.¹ Near the beginning of the story, Danny describes Tony, a small invisible boy who lives in his mouth and gives him advice whenever he needs it. This movie is filled with shots of a haunted hotel, an elevator filled with blood, and violent deaths, yet one of the most psychologically chilling scenes occurs when Danny becomes so traumatized by the unfolding events that he is no longer able to function. In this scene, Danny's mother finds him in a trancelike state and tries to rouse him by shaking him, repeating his name, and telling him to wake up. When the boy responds, it is in the distinctive monotonic voice of Tony saying, "Danny can't wake up, Mrs. Torrance . . . Danny's gone away, Mrs. Torrance."

Although, even in the movies, pretend friends don't usually commandeered children's bodies, they are often depicted as the inventions of lonely, unhappy children. In the movie *Bogus*, about a boy who creates an imaginary friend at a time of personal crisis, the child protagonist is laughed at by other children, runs away from home, and for a time seems lost in a fantasy world. The popular comic strip, *Calvin and Hobbes*, presents a humorous depiction of imaginary companions, but still raises questions about the type of child who has one. We enjoy Calvin's wild imagination and his exploits with his stuffed tiger, Hobbes, but in real life, we wouldn't laugh at a boy who

did so poorly in school and had no real-life friends. Calvin's long-suffering teacher counts the days until retirement, his mother reads child psychology books to find out where she went wrong, and his father questions whether they should have become parents at all! Even Bill Watterson, the creator of *Calvin and Hobbes*, says he wouldn't want a child like Calvin in his home.²

No wonder some parents worry about the implications of their children having imaginary companions. And it is not just popular culture that gives imaginary companions a bad reputation. Early psychological research on this topic often suggested negative implications.³ The silver lining in these studies was that imaginary companions also tended to be interpreted as signs of special intelligence or creativity, a possibility that shows up in some portrayals in the media. A comedy sketch on *Saturday Night Live* some years ago depicted two parents fighting over whose child had the better (i.e., more unique, detailed, creative) imaginary companion. In fact, some parents have expressed concern to me about their children not having imaginary companions. They wonder if this is a negative sign regarding their children's intellectual or creative potential.

So what does having an imaginary companion mean? What is the likelihood that a child might become so engrossed in an imaginary world as to lose touch with reality altogether? Is the creation of an imaginary companion the first sign of mental illness? Is it an early marker of special intelligence? These are some of the questions addressed in this book. The answers come from an analysis of psychological research with young children. Many of the older studies that painted a negative picture of imaginary companions had methodological problems. More reliable information collected in recent years indicates that fantasy play is an important component of children's cognitive and emotional development. More specifically, the creation of an imaginary companion is healthy and relatively common.

This is not to say that the stereotype portrayed in movies is without basis in reality. A child like the boy in *Bogus* who lost his mother and had to move to a new and strange place would be a likely candidate for having an imaginary companion. The creation of a pretend friend in such cases can be an adaptive response on the part of the child for dealing with difficult issues in his or her life. Fantasy allows a child to work on a variety of concerns, fears, and problems. More often,

though, children pretend to have an imaginary friend simply because it is fun. The view that is emerging from recent research is that the children who create pretend friends are very social people who particularly enjoy interacting with others. When no one is around to play with, these children make someone up.

Chapter 2 is devoted to defining “imaginary companion.” Thus far I have used the term as if everyone knows exactly what I am talking about, but there are lots of play activities that parents and others might consider having an imaginary friend. Does the friend have to be invisible to count as an imaginary companion or are children’s teddy bears and other toys also potential candidates? Does the imaginary friend have to be nice? What about imaginary friends whose mean or scary behavior makes them more like imaginary enemies?

Although for research purposes, children tend to be categorized as either having or not having an imaginary companion, I consider this dichotomy to be misleading or at least simplistic. Many children have several imaginary friends at a time, and some acquire new ones as others disappear. Children may also have sustained and elaborate fantasies that do not easily fit into what we label as an “imaginary companion.” For example, many preschool children pretend to *be* an animal or another person on a regular basis—they take on the imaginary character and act it out, rather than pretend it is a separate entity from themselves. Chapter 2 provides descriptive information about the kinds of pretense that might be considered examples of imaginary companions, as well as some variations on the theme.

Chapter 3 describes the research investigating possible differences between children who create imaginary companions and those who do not. The importance of the definitional issues discussed in Chapter 2 immediately becomes clear when we consider this literature. One of the challenges of interpreting the research findings is that there has been considerable variation from study to study in what is included in the category “imaginary companion.” However, the general picture emerging from recent studies is that, in most respects, the similarities between the two groups of children are more striking than their differences. When differences are found, they tend to turn the stereotype of children who have imaginary companions on its head. Children with imaginary companions appear to be *less* shy, more able to focus their attention, and to have advanced social understanding when compared with other children.

Another type of potential difference between children with and

without imaginary companions that is explored in Chapter 3 concerns the role played by parental attitudes and cultural beliefs about fantasy play. Although North American parents sometimes worry about imaginary companions, in general they tend to promote children's pretend play, and our culture provides a wealth of fantasy material that is often incorporated into children's private fantasy creations. For example, many young children have imaginary companions similar to characters they have seen on television or in movies, such as the Little Mermaid or Ninja Turtles. However, not all children are encouraged to engage in fantasy play. There are substantial cultural differences in parental reaction to, and interpretation of, childhood fantasies that are likely to affect children's engagement in pretense, as well as their understanding of the distinction between fantasy and reality. The experience of childhood can be quite different in cultures in which fantasy is actively discouraged because it is viewed as a waste of time, equivalent to deceit, or even evidence of demonic possession.

Chapter 4 deals with the reasons children create imaginary companions. There is currently considerable interest in the possibility that one of the special functions of pretend play is to help children control and master their emotions.⁴ The research on imaginary companions supports this view, suggesting that pretend friends may be created to serve a variety of emotional needs, including a desire for companionship, a way to work through fears, or a method of dealing with actual or perceived restrictions. Children also create imaginary companions as a response to traumatic life situations—which is why clinicians have sometimes linked imaginary companions with psychological distress.

In Chapter 5, I start by asking if children think their imaginary companions are real, but answering this question requires a much broader discussion of the general distinction between fantasy and reality. Overall, I think children's grasp of this distinction tends to be underestimated, but it's a tricky question because fantasy comes in a variety of forms. The topics covered in this chapter include children's beliefs in fantasy characters such as Santa Claus, their understanding of fantasy material on television and in movies, their comprehension of joint pretend play with others, and their conception of dreams, as well as their beliefs about their imaginary companions. Sometimes the boundary between fantasy and reality is not entirely clear to children, but when it comes to pretend friends, chil-

dren seem to know exactly what is going on. They might think Santa Claus and the Tooth Fairy are real, but they are quite knowledgeable about the fantasy status of the people, creatures, and objects that are the figments of their own imaginations.

In Chapter 6, I discuss the ultimate fate of imaginary companions. What happens to them? When and why are they given up? Not much is known about how these fantasies end, but the available evidence suggests that children simply move on to other things. In most cases, no well-marked event leads to the imaginary companion's disappearance—it simply fades away. Many parents report that children abandon their imaginary companions at about 6 years of age when they start school, but there is reason to question this commonly held assumption. Some pretend friends are retained much longer, and sometimes imaginary companions first appear when the children are well beyond the preschool years. For some of these older children, fantasies about imaginary characters become increasingly elaborate until entire fantasy worlds are created for them to inhabit. The imaginary companions of older children are described in Chapter 7, along with adult behaviors that I consider similar to having an imaginary companion.

In Chapter 8, I summarize some of the main points of this book and discuss the larger issues raised by the study of imaginary companions. The bottom line is that although imaginary companions and other fantasies have sometimes been interpreted as signs of emotional disturbance, a break with reality, or even the emergence of multiple personalities, they really are just a variation on the theme of all the pretend play that is going on in the preschool years, a period sometimes referred to as “the high season of imaginative play.”⁵ I hope this book will help explain some of the reasons for our misconceptions about imaginary companions, while stressing the important role played by such fantasies in the cognitive and emotional development of healthy children.

2

What Are Imaginary Companions Like?



ONE 4-year-old who participated in our research told us about two invisible birds named Nutsy and Nutsy (a male and a female) who lived in a tree outside her bedroom window. According to the child, the two Nutsys had brightly colored feathers, were about 12 inches tall, and talked incessantly. Sometimes the little girl was irritated by the clumsy and generally raucous behavior of these birds, but usually their silliness made her laugh. The child's parents were well aware of the Nutsys; they regularly observed their daughter talking and playing with them, and they were frequently informed about the Nutsys' opinions and activities. In fact, Nutsy and Nutsy were almost like part of the family. The birds went along on outings by riding on top of the car, they had their own places set at the dinner table, and their antics were enjoyed by all. I met the Nutsys myself one day when they accompanied the little girl to my lab. I provided a chair for them, and the little girl laughed at how funny they looked as they stood on tiptoe to peer over the table at her. Two years after she first told us about Nutsy and Nutsy, the child still remembered them, and her mother reported that she and her daughter sometimes reminisced about their exploits.

Elaborate invisible creatures like Nutsy and Nutsy who are played with for an extended period of time and are described consistently by both the child and her parents would fit almost anyone's definition of an imaginary companion. However, there are many variations on the imaginary companion theme. The animals and people who populate children's fantasy lives differ in their vividness, personality de-

velopment, and the extent to which they have some basis in the real world. Some children have an imaginary version of a real friend or adopt a character from a movie or book as an imaginary companion (e.g., Ariel from the Walt Disney movie *The Little Mermaid*). Other children use a favorite stuffed toy, their own image in a mirror, or their hands as props in their pretense. Sometimes the props are more idiosyncratic. There is one documented case of a child who had an ongoing (and rather stormy) relationship with the chest of drawers in his bedroom, speaking to it as if it were aware of his thoughts and behaviors.¹ In another case, a little girl had friends she called Leafies who lived in an aspen tree in her backyard.²

Fantasy people and animals also vary in the length of time they inhabit a child's imagination. Sometimes imaginary companions are stable, long-lived, and played with regularly. They may even be passed down from one child to the next in a family, like outgrown but still serviceable clothes. Other pretend friends have a much more transitory existence, drifting in and out of the 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 long. Other children had only one or two imaginary companions at a time, but they updated their friends frequently, for example, trading in a blue-eyed blond boy named Tompy for a mischievous female mouse named Gadget. In some cases, children have described an army of Martians or a host of lizards rather than a solitary individual.³ In fact, it is common for children to have two or more imaginary companions.

Given the diversity in children's fantasy play, parents are often unsure if their own child would be considered to have an imaginary companion. This makes it difficult for parents to decide if the research findings about imaginary companions are relevant to their children. In this chapter, I discuss in some detail what imaginary companions are like, and the different sources of information that researchers have used to identify the children who have them.

What counts as an "imaginary companion"?

Invisible friends versus stuffed animals

Many young children endow a stuffed animal, doll, or other toy with a stable personality and treat it as if it were real—talking to it, mak-

ing a special voice for it, and consulting it about problems. This type of pretend play is the basis of Bill Watterson's comic strip *Calvin and Hobbes* about a small boy and his stuffed tiger companion. One might also think of Winnie the Pooh, the teddy bear friend of Christopher Robin in A. A. Milne's children's books, or the toy bunny in *The Velveteen Rabbit*. Parents often ask if special toys are examples of imaginary companions.

Experts on childhood fantasy differ in their opinions about toys. In the past, the term "imaginary companion" was restricted to fantasy friends who were invisible, excluding cases in which toys were used as props. For example, in one of the first widely read articles on the subject, published in 1934, Dr. Margaret Svendsen of the Institute for Juvenile Research in Chicago defined an imaginary companion as "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. This excludes that type of imaginative play in which an object is personified, or in which the child himself assumes the role of some person in his environment."⁴ In order to be absolutely clear about her definition, Svendsen gave the following real life example:

Shortly before her second birthday Mary referred to "Tagar," her imaginary companion. She led Tagar around on an imaginary string. Food was kept for it under the radiator where it also slept; she always fed it on the floor. It was particularly fond of ice cream, as she was. "Berrie and Auntie" followed Tagar, appearing when she was about 3-1/2 years of age. They were two persons, but lived together. Mary would set places for them at the family table. Although dishes and silver were laid and Mary would ask if they had enough, real food was never offered them. On other occasions, she would seize the opportunity at meal-time to tell her father all the things which they had done. Mary might be punished but they never were, and never did anything wrong. Berrie and Auntie frequently accompanied her and her parents on outings, and on several occasions she attempted to draw her real companion into play with them, by insisting that she talk with them on the telephone.⁵

Of the 111 children in Svendsen's sample, 13.4 percent were identified as having imaginary companions. Her estimate is quite low, in part because the children ranged in age from 3 to 16 years, and it is likely that at least some of the older children had forgotten the imaginary friends they had when they were younger. And what

about the omission of stuffed animals and other toys? It seems to me that at least in some cases, toys function quite well as imaginary companions. Certainly if a little boy similar to Watterson's Calvin participated in my research, I would want him to be in the group of children described as having imaginary companions.

One argument for excluding stuffed animals is that they have an existence and physical appearance that is independent of the child's imagination. Perhaps a companion is only truly imaginary when it exists solely in the mind's eye of the child and none of the details are specified by the environment. The trouble with this reasoning is that play with stuffed animals and play with invisible imaginary companions are not as different as one might think with regard to how much imagination is involved. According to Kendall Walton, professor of philosophy at the University of Michigan, the experience of imagining an entity such as an imaginary bear is apt to be *more* vivid if an actual object serves as a prop.⁶ And clearly, children use their imaginations to embellish the appearance of toys that serve as imaginary companions. In the child's mind, the imagined friend based on a toy might look quite different from the way the toy appears to a more impartial observer. The mother sees a scruffy little stuffed dog that she would like to whisk away for a quick cycle through the washing machine, but to the child, the dog appears large, fluffy, and graceful.

This insight is captured in Watterson's technique of drawing the stuffed tiger in his comic strip very differently depending on whether the reader is seeing Hobbes as he appears to Calvin (i.e., a large, expressive, and lifelike beast) or as he appears to another character in the cartoon (i.e., a small inert toy). Ronald Benson and David Pryor of the Department of Psychiatry at the University of Michigan described this kind of discrepancy in perspective when they asked a 16-year-old girl to show them the stuffed dog that had served as her childhood companion.⁷ When she located the dog in the back of her closet, she was shocked to see how tattered and worn it was. She felt she was seeing the toy for the first time as it appeared to other people.

The distinction between stuffed animals and invisible imaginary companions is also blurred because parents frequently respond to their child's expression of interest in a particular kind of animal by supplying him or her with a toy version of it. One adult who participated in my research recalled that her mother asked her lots of

questions about the imaginary companion she had as a small child (an invisible "Mouse-Mouse") and then made a stuffed animal to her daughter's specifications, complete with brown fur and blue-flowered super-hero cape.

More commonly, parents simply buy toys that correspond to the type of animals their children are imagining in their play. One 5-year-old in our research began creating fantasies about dolphins when she was 2 years old. Her father reported that she used to pretend to hold tiny dolphins in her hands and to give them to family members. Because of her interest in dolphins, the parents gave her a stuffed dolphin that became the prop for an imaginary companion named Dipper. When asked to describe Dipper, the child did not describe the physical attributes of her toy (a small, gray plush dolphin), but instead reported that Dipper was "the size of a door," had sparkles and stripes (unlike "a regular dolphin"), and lived far away on a star. These same details were repeated when the child was interviewed a year later. In her pretend play with dolphins, this child moved flexibly between interacting with an entirely invisible friend and using a toy as a prop in her play. I also know cases in which a child first used a toy as an imaginary companion and later invented an invisible version of the friend.

If we decide that stuffed animals, dolls, and other toys sometimes function as imaginary companions, a new problem arises. How do we distinguish between toys that are imaginary companions and toys that are not? After all, the majority of children have a stuffed animal or a doll. A toy that is played with from time to time, but spends most of its time on the shelf, would obviously not warrant the label "imaginary companion." Other toys are special, but not in the same way as an imaginary companion. For example, some children have a teddy bear that they habitually cling to, sleep with, and use for comfort. Toys, blankets, and other items used in this way by young children are referred to as "transitional objects."⁸ Transitional objects are of interest to psychologists because they are believed to help some children work out the distinction between self and other, but enjoying the comfort of a soft toy is not the same as creating a distinct personality for it.

Professors Dorothy Singer and Jerome Singer, leading authorities on children's imagination and authors of *The House of Make-Believe*, chose to include stuffed animals and dolls as possible imaginary companions in their research conducted at Yale University. They dis-

tinguished the toys serving as imaginary companions from other playthings in the following way: "Our data do include parents' reports of their children's transformations of stuffed animals, which assume human-like properties. We did not, however, count teddy bears or dolls where these were simply carried around or treated in the concrete fashion of the transitional object. Rather, to be included they had to be endowed by the child with definite human qualities and be treated as a friend or playmate."⁹ The inclusion of toys helps to account for why Singer and Singer report that about 65 percent of children have imaginary companions, an estimate more than four times higher than Svendsen's.

Dr. Jennifer Mauro, a clinical psychologist who is an expert on imaginary companions, explicitly mentioned toys when explaining to the children in her research what she meant by a pretend friend. "Pretend friends are like dolls or toys that you pretend are real or people that you pretend are real. They are make-believe friends. Do you have a pretend friend?"¹⁰ Of the imaginary companions described in response to this question, 41 percent turned out to be invisible people, 19 percent were invisible animals, and 39 percent were dolls or stuffed animals. Like Singer and Singer, Mauro estimated the incidence of imaginary companions to be quite high—more than 50 percent of young children.

Clearly, the decision to include or exclude stuffed animals or dolls as imaginary companions has a large effect on how common one believes the phenomenon to be. Some psychologists have taken an intermediate stance when it comes to stuffed animals, resulting in estimates that fall between Svendsen's and Singer and Singer's. For example, John and Elizabeth Newson, two British psychologists who have conducted extensive research on the lives of young children, estimated that 22 percent of 4-year-olds have imaginary companions.¹¹ For the most part these researchers excluded stuffed animals or dolls as imaginary companions, but in a few cases they relented. "It was clearly necessary to admit a character to the fantasy category because, although having a 'real' origin, so extensive a saga had been built upon this foundation that fantasy had long since out-stripped reality." In fact, the Newsons' own daughter had such elaborate fantasies about her doll Susanna that they decided to interview the child about her 4-year-old daughter (the doll) in the same way that they interviewed real parents about their children. The transcript—a 4-year-old's view of her supposedly 4-year-old child and her opinions