

TELEVISION

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Marjorie Taylor

Children's imaginary companions

Children invent fantasy companions that assume a whole variety of forms, ranging from children, animals, and ghosts to even droll characters such as the "Butcher Shop Guy" or a 160-year-old commercial traveller. The kids really enjoy these pretend activities. They experience no loss of contact with reality, but enrich their everyday lives as a result.

In the United States children watch a lot of television and go to a lot of movies. They are read many books with fantasy content and are given lots of fantasy toys. All of this exposure to fantasy starts early. Fantasy-oriented toys like stuffed animals and dolls are given to infants. Babies are dressed up in costumes before they could possibly know what is going on. By the time they are five or six, many American children have watched videos of talking dogs, mermaids, fairies, and the like so often that they know them by heart. What effect is all this fantasy consumption having on the natural development of children's imagination? Has the consumption of fantasy produced for children by adults affected children's capacity to produce fantasy for themselves? Are the private fantasies of young children now populated by characters they first encountered on television - the product of someone else's imagination? My research has not addressed this question directly, because we have not systematically studied children's television viewing in any depth. However, creative imagination appears to be alive and well in our children. I am basing this claim on a decade of experience studying the creation of imaginary companions (ICs), invented characters that children interact with on a regular basis. We were curious about what these pretend friends were like. Also we wanted to know more about the characteristics of children who create ICs, the developmental course of this type of pretending, what ICs tell us about the developing human mind, and how are they related to adult types of creative activities.

What are imaginary friends like? Some time ago, Stephanie Carlson and I put together a taxonomy of ICs that we have collected over the years, - a total of 341 descriptions. We used three different sources of information: 179 descriptions from children 3 to 12 years of age), 42 descriptions from parents and 120 retrospective reports from adults (252 participants). Each source has its strengths and weaknesses, but taken together they provide a comprehensive picture of imaginary companions.

In categorizing ICs, one of the most obvious distinctions to be made is between ICs that are completely invisible and ICs that are based on toys, such as dolls or stuffed animals. Some researchers have excluded toys as ICs, but we think that sometimes children's imagined relationships with stuffed animals or dolls become so vivid that it is fair to consider them a type of IC. I am not talking about a toy that is a transitional object, something that is carried around for comfort. In contrast, some children talk to a particular toy and listen to what it has to say. This can be a stable relationship that lasts for years and it makes sense to categorize the toy as an IC. Ernie, for example, was given to a little girl when she was 8 months old (see fig. 1). Over the years she had dozens of other stuffed animals and dolls, Ernie was her confident and special friend for years. There may be some differences between invisible and toy ICs. For example, Tracy Gleason has found that parents are more apt to know about ICs that are toys and that toy ICs are more likely to be shared. However, in our research we have found that the psychological characteristics that distinguish children with ICs from other children are true for the children with toy ICs as well as children with invisible ICs.

Altogether we collected 105 descriptions of special toys that seemed to function as ICs (31% of the IC descriptions). The rest of the 236 descriptions were of invisible ICs (see table 1). Many people assume

that an IC would usually be a little boy or girl about the same age as the child who would function as a good playmate. We found about 27% of the invisible ICs were of this type - regular everyday sorts of invisible girls and boys that are fun to play with. For example, Fake Rachel (one of four ICs that have lasted for 3 years) was originally based on a friend named Rachel. This child had a fake version for all her friends (see fig. 2). Note that it was not unusual for ICs to be based on real people (16% of our sample).

Many ICs are playmates that are not regular children. They have magical characteristics or special powers (such as being able to fly or change shape), or they have unusual physical characteristics (17%). For example, Baintor is a tiny completely white person who lives in the light of lamps, Jerry lives in a secret vault, the Skateboard Guy lives in a boy's pocket. Sometimes the IC is much younger (5%). For example, Cream is an invisible baby who lives on the child's hand. Sometime the IC is much older than the child (13%). For example, Nobby is an invisible 160-year-old business man who talks to the child in between trips to Portland and Seattle. 20% of the invisible ICs were animals. The animal ICs often have the ability to talk or otherwise communicate with the child. Some animal friends are further embellished with magical powers or special characteristics (8% - see fig. 3). For example, "Dipper" is an invisible flying dolphin who lives on a star, never sleeps and is "very very very very fast." He is "about the size of a regular dolphin, but covered with stars and all kinds of shiny stuff." "Nutsy and Nutsy" are two invisible brightly coloured birds who argue a lot with each other and make the child laugh. "Pepper, Crayon, and Golliwod" are three invisible "sheas," a type of invisible flea. Pepper is pink with pink hair, Crayon is plaid, and Golliwod is black with black hair. The child carried them around and protected them from the evil planet aliens who were looking for them.

In addition to invisible people and animals, we had other categories that showed up less often. Our sample included superheroes like Superman, Wonder Woman (3%), ghosts (5%) and a small number of invisible enemies. It turns out that not all ICs are friendly or nice; some are predominately mean and frightening to the child. Six out of 236 (3%) were in this category. For example, "Acher" is a 5-year-old invisible boy who "is very bad to me, hits me, kicks me, pulls my shirt, and jumps off my bed." (This child also mentioned a little invisible girl named "Darnit", but did not provide any other information about her.) 9% of the invisible ICs (22 of the 236) were categorized as other. This category included the "Butcher Shop Guy" who is an invisible green Cyclops. The "Butcher Shop Guy" was a world traveler and liked to tell the boy about his adventures. He didn't work in a butcher shop and he didn't wear clothes associated with butchers (see fig. 4). In fact, the boy could not remember why he called him the "Butcher Shop Guy". The parents knew about the "Butcher Shop Guy", but they were surprised by their child's drawing of him. Parents are often surprised about ICs. Even when they are aware that their child has an IC, it is not uncommon for them to make incorrect assumptions about the IC.

In another study Stephanie Carlson and I viewed 152 3- and 4-year-old children and their parents to find out about children's imaginary friends as well as other types of pretend play. Both children and their parents were interviewed (about a week between the two interviews). At Session 1, we asked children about imaginary companions in the following way:

"Now I'm going to ask you some questions about friends. Some friends are real like the kids who live on your street, the ones you play with. And some friends are pretend friends. Pretend friends are ones that are make-believe, that you pretend are real. Do you have a pretend friend?"

If the child said "yes," he or she was asked a series of questions about the friend (name, toy or completely pretend, gender, age, physical appearance, what the child liked and did not like about the friend, and where the friend lived). Parents were asked about their children's ICs at Session 1 also. Then we used the information from all four interviews to determine if the child had a pretend friend - toy or invisible.

In this study we were interested in another type of role play as well. Role play refers to a type of pretense in which the child temporarily acts out the part of someone other than the self using pretend actions and utterances. According to Harris (2000), there are three types of play involving imaginary characters - the difference is in the vehicle used for the character:

- When the child invents a creature or person and interacts with it, but does not rely on any prop from the environment (i.e., the child interacts with an invisible imaginary companion).
- When a child invents a creature or person and then projects it onto a doll or toy, Harris describes the child as using the doll or toy as the vehicle for the role play.
- When a child acts out or impersonates an imaginary character, Harris describes the child as using the self as the vehicle for the role play, e.g., the child pretends to be a monster, fireman, Batman, etc. (see also table 2).

39% of the children were categorized as involved in elaborate role play. 28% of this sample had ICs. We

have followed 100 of these children to the age of seven and found that 63% had an IC at some time in their life. If toy ICs are excluded, 43% had ICs.

We also found gender differences in role play. At this young age, girls are more likely to have an IC than boys; but it is not the case that boys are engaged in less role play. They are just particularly likely to act out or impersonate the character themselves rather than treat it as a separate individual. This result might be related to the types of roles boys and girls enjoy. For example, in research by Harter and Chao on gender differences in the characteristics of ICs, the ICs created by girls tended to be ones that required nurturance and caretaking. Little boys, on the other hand, tended to create ICs that were powerful - the sort of character that actually lends itself to impersonation (i.e., you might want to act out yourself).

So to sum up this research, what we see is that by age four many children are engaged in elaborate forms of role play. There is tremendous diversity in the types of characters that populate children's imaginations. Even though they have seen many characters in books, television and movies, for the most part the characters they create are unique. This is not to say that the idea of the imaginary friend never comes from an outside source such as a family member or friend. For example, "Margarine" (see fig. 5) was originally created by a little boy, but his younger sister enjoyed "Margarine" as well (see fig. 5). And children are certainly exposed to the idea of having a special friend in books, like "Winnie the Pooh" and the "Velveteen Rabbit", and also on television. For example, I wonder how many children got the idea of creating an invisible friend from watching "Snuffleupagus." who was visible only to "Big Bird" until 1985 when everyone started to be able to see him. But the point here is that we find plenty of originality in the characters that children are inventing for their own play. Some little boys are running around pretending to be Batman, and some little girls have invisible versions of Disney characters like "The Little Mermaid" as their imaginary friends, but overall the characters they create are incredibly diverse (see table 3).

Our research also shows that engaging in role play is related to measures of social understanding (e.g., being better able to take the perspective of another person), so it is associated with positive characteristics in young children. These results go against the common stereotype of a child who invents a friend because he or she is too shy or withdrawn. These children are actually less shy and particularly enjoy social interaction. Sometimes it is assumed that a child who is absorbed in a fantasy about an IC is out of touch with reality - somehow the line between fantasy and reality has become blurred. More generally, children are often described as having some difficulty with the distinction between fantasy and reality. We certainly do give them a lot to mull over in the fantasy material we present them with, and sometimes they don't get things quite right. However, the products of children's own imaginations have a different status than fantasy that is presented readymade to children. When it comes to ICs, children seem to know exactly what is going on. There might be a few children who think their friends are real, but for the most part, although children love their ICs and are absorbed in the fantasy, they know that they are not real. Many a time I have interviewed a child about an IC - the child observes as I listen carefully and write down whatever is said. Then at some point in the interview, the child is very likely to pause, look me in the eyes and say "You know, it's just pretend."

Table 1:

Types of Invisible Imaginary Companions (N=236)

Type of Invisible IC	Child Report	Parent report	Retro Report	Total	Percentage
Ordinary Child	35	10	18	63	27%
Magical Child	21	6	13	40	17%
Baby	5	2	4	11	5%
Older Person	23	4	2	29	12%
Animal	23	9	12	44	19%
Superhero	2	0	5	7	3%
Enemy	4	1	2	7	3%
Ghost, Angel Presence	4	0	9	13	5%
Invisible Self	2	0	2	4	2%
Other	6	0	12	18	9%

Table 2

Role play	(Harris, 2000)
Role play:	The child temporarily acts out the part of someone else using pretend actions and utterances
Nothing as vehicle:	The child invents a creature or person and interacts with it, but does not rely on any prop from the environment
Toy as vehicle:	The child invents a creature or person and then projects it onto a doll or toy
Self as vehicle:	The child acts out or impersonates an imaginary character

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THE AUTHOR

Marjorie Taylor received her Ph.D. from Stanford University. She is currently Professor and Head of Psychology at the University of Oregon in Eugene, Oregon, U.S.A

INFORMATION

Internationales
Zentralinstitut
für das Jugend-
und Bildungsfernsehen
IZI

Tel.: 089 - 59 00 21 40
Fax.: 089 - 59 00 23 79
eMail: izi@brnet.de

Internet: www.izi.de

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