

7 to 8

Pretend Friend

An imaginary pal at this age? That's a good thing!

BY MICHELLE ANTHONY, M.A., Ph.D.

“TELL ME about your imaginary friends,” I say to my three kids in the car one day. This opens an animated conversation about the invisible people who fill their lives: My 4-year-old recounts tales about James, who always seems to make bad choices; my 7-year-old describes her pals as fanciful animals that take her to magical places; and my 10-year-old tells stories about adoptions from the Imaginary Friends Foster Home in the tree house in our backyard.

A little more than a decade ago, revelations like these raised the eyebrows of parents and psychologists alike. It was thought that pretend friends came to life sometime after a child turned 2 and typically faded at about the age of 4. Older children who still had imaginary friends were believed to be at risk for social isolation or even mental illness.

But thanks to the work of psychology professors Marjorie Taylor of the University of Oregon and Stephanie Carlson of the University of Washington, we better understand the role imaginary friends play in children's lives. We know that pretend pals are alive and well, often past the age of 10. In one study, almost one-third of 6- and 7-year-olds polled reported having at least one such invisible playmate.

Taylor and Carlson's research demonstrated that children this age with imaginary companions may have above-average IQs, may be more creative, and tend to be happier than



other kids. In addition, they have better verbal skills and better social understanding.

If your child has a pretend pal, ask him about it if he doesn't mind. He may tell you it's just plain fun! If you think about it, it can be a lot like writing a fiction story without the pencil and paper. The presence of such friends can also allow children to deal with their emotions and to work through social or emotional issues they are confronting. For example, if your child is afraid at night, she may create a ferocious lion to keep her safe or a timid mouse she can share her worries with. Both strategies demonstrate creative problem solving and are a way of learning to understand and cope with emotions. **P&C**

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