



Imaginary Friends

Imaginary friends are common and normal: As many as 65% of children up to age seven played with at least one imaginary friend at some point in their lives. Adults need not have any concern—not only are imaginary friends common and normal, but children who play with imaginary companions may have distinct developmental benefits from the experience.

- Negotiating with imaginary friends can be a way for children to practice negotiating skills. This can be an important part of social development.
- Children can also explore difficult feelings in a safe way, with their imaginary friends. This can aid in emotional development.
- Children who have imaginary friends may have better verbal skills than peers who don't have imaginary friends, and they may be better able to understand other points of view.
- Playing out confusing life situations is also part of imaginary play/fantasy play. Researchers have found this to be true for older children and even for some adults.

As children grow older (children tend to develop imaginary friends around age three), these imaginary friends can change and become more complex. Children often create entire imaginary worlds. And it is not unusual for a child to have more (sometimes many more) than one imaginary friend.

Enemies and friends: Researchers also point out that adults shouldn't worry that children often have imaginary "enemies" as well as imaginary "friends". Negotiating with imaginary enemies might not be as fun for children as interacting with their imaginary friends, but it can be useful developmentally—not all social interactions in life are fun and easy, so it's good social practice!

They know it's pretend: Researchers stress that children are fully aware that their imaginary friends are imaginary. In fact, in one study, children wanted to make sure during the interviews that researchers understood that this was all pretend. They didn't want the researchers to confuse reality with fantasy!

If you are interested in reading more, here is a citation for a research study about imaginary friends: *Journal of Developmental Psychology*. 40(6), November 2004, 1173-1187.