



NEW JERSEY
PSYCHOLOGICAL ASSOCIATION

My Child Has An Imaginary Friend

By Sue Breckwoldt, PhD

“My name is Amy. I just turned 6. I have a sister called Anna. She has beautiful, silky long hair that she wears in a ponytail. She always has something funny to say or a new adventure up her sleeve. Everybody loves her. She has all the latest toys, the cutest clothes. Her favorite color is ruby red. She loves coloring, drawing, and making her own jewelry. Her favorite desserts are cupcakes and chocolate ice cream. Best of all, she is my twin. Even better yet, no one can tell us apart! Even my parents sometimes have trouble with that! You have to look at us very closely to see that Anna’s eyes are just a tiny shade darker than mine. We do everything together. Anna has so many friends she can hardly count them. She gets invited to everyone’s birthday parties and always brings me along. One of my favorite things that we do together is playing dress-up. Last night we dressed up as princesses....”

The above narrative describes the way in which my daughter Amy typically talks about her imaginary twin.

Should I be worried? Is this a sign of emotional distress or loneliness?

No. Research shows that a high percentage of children create imaginary friends. These children are being creatively resourceful. The modern consensus is that children use imaginary friends to provide company during times when friends or family are not readily available. A transitional life event such as changing schools or a relocation can often spurn a child’s interest in creating an imaginary companion to temporarily fill in for old friends and schoolmates until connections with new playmates can be made.

What is the best way for me to talk to Amy about her imaginary friend?

Play along. You probably won’t have a choice. Imaginary friends tend to want to take up space around the kitchen table or in front of the television during family movie night. Feel free to make room for Anna and include her in the family activities. Don’t feel that you have to create your own relationship with the imaginary friend. Just accept the relationship and let your child be the one to communicate with her imaginary twin.

But won’t Amy run the risk of coming to believe that Anna is real if we, as a family, act eager to welcome the newcomer into our family circle?

No. Children are largely aware that their imaginary friend is make-believe. Just as magically as she appeared in the child’s life, the child is ready to let go of her imaginary friend when she begins to outgrow her.

What is known about the type of imaginary friends a child creates?

Imaginary friends' personalities are just as diverse and unique as the personalities of the children who people our world. Their identities often extend much beyond humankind. An imaginary friend could be a scaly dinosaur, a magical creature, or a stuffed mouse that's come to life. Even multicolored kites, butterflies, fire trucks, or footballs, especially amongst younger children of toddler age through pre-K and K, can take on complete identities and acquire names most suited to the child's wishes.

Does the particular identity the child chooses for her imaginary peer have any special kind of significance?

In younger children, the identity of and the relationship with the imaginary friend can help to structure and organize their world. Three, four, and five year olds often play a parental role with respect to their imaginary companion, enabling them to explore themes of taking charge and control. Children a bit older sometimes create companions who are role models and may appear to be a bit more adventurous, courageous, or self-confident than the child herself but, for the most part, the relationship with the imaginary peer is one of equality. Imaginary friends are most common amongst first born and only children. Having an imaginary companion when young is often linked to higher self-esteem, a more outgoing nature and enhanced creativity in later life.

Are there ever circumstances under which a child does not outgrow her imaginary friend?

There are instances in which a child prefers to spend time with her imaginary companion consistently turning down invitations for play dates with real-life friends. Under such conditions it is advisable to seek the help of a licensed child psychologist. The psychologist can explore the child's desire to isolate herself and begin to work with the child toward establishing safe and rewarding friendships in the outside world.

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