

You are here: [Home](#) / [\(2-4\) Toddler Pink](#) / [Behavior](#) / Is Having an Imaginary Friend Good for Your Daughter?

Is Having an Imaginary Friend Good for Your Daughter?

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Many parents find themselves asking, “*Is it normal for my daughter to have an imaginary friend?*” In short, yes.

Pretend play is a healthy, important part of your child's development and helps her develop curiosity, creativity, and intellect. “During the age of 2-7 years old, a child's cognitive development allows for fantasy and pretending,” says [Brenda Nixon](#), parenting expert and author. “Having an imaginary friend also provides your daughter with a chance to learn about different types of roles, relationships, and self-expression.”

Creating imaginary friends is most typical for children between the ages of three and six. However, imaginary pals are as common as apple pie among even *grade school* children. A 2004 study in the *Journal of Developmental Psychology* found that imaginary friends are as common among *school age* children as they are the preschool age set. Psychologists believe that 65 percent of school aged children have an imaginary friend by the age of seven.

The Benefits of Imagination:

- *Teaches children to express their emotions.* Imaginary companions can help your daughter work through complex feelings that she may not understand how to express. “Sometimes it is a way for the child to express grief, anxiety, happiness, meet the need for loneliness, companionship, or comfort,” says Nixon. During the toddler and early grade-school years, adults make most of the decisions about their children's lives, leaving them to try to find new ways to exercise control. To help your child feel some sense of control she may call on her imaginary friend. Imaginary friends can be great allies in helping children sort through difficult issues as well as provide them with comfort and safety. Judy Wright, author and international speaker, acknowledges that an imaginary friend helped her granddaughter, Lexi, work through difficult feelings after her parents divorce. “Her imaginary sister could say things to her parents that Lexi would have been hesitant to express. She also worked through her anxiety by having conversations with her imaginary 'sister.’”

Sometimes imaginary friends are born of a need for protection and safety. Children who have experienced trauma may create an imaginary playmate to help them cope with overwhelming feelings. Bette Alkazan, a licensed marriage and family therapist and parenting coach, believes it helps children “relieve some of the stress and tension of their experience, though the presence of an imaginary friend does not necessarily indicate a trauma,” she says.

- *Increased intelligence.* There are many benefits associated with children having imaginary playmates. Studies have indicated that children who have imaginary friends (invisible or personified toys) tend to have better verbal skills, social comprehension, and are very creative. “My daughter had an imaginary friend for a couple of years between ages three and five,” says [Dr. Laura Markham](#), clinical psychologist. “Now 14, she writes fiction nonstop, constantly inventing characters and scenarios.”

How to Handle her New Friend:

- *Respect her new imaginary relationship and allow her the freedom to express herself.* It's important to remember that to young children, imaginary friends are quite real. Parents should never belittle or make-fun of their child's companion or tell them that the friend isn't real.

- *Welcome your child's new friend.* "Parents should embrace the imaginary friend and listen closely to what the child may be trying to express through this means of communication," says Bette Alkazian, licensed marriage and family therapist. "It can be a great relationship builder if the parent doesn't dismiss the child's imaginative creation and welcomes the imaginary friend into the family."

When it's a potential problem:

In most cases, parents do not need to be concerned about their daughter's imaginary friends unless something 'out of the ordinary' happens.

- *When imaginary friends take "the blame" for your daughter's behavior.* Imaginary friends can act like a child's alter-ego taking the blame for toys that didn't get picked up or spilling the milk. At times, this can be an obstacle when trying to teach your child to take responsibility for her own actions. Parents should encourage their daughters to take personal responsibility for her actions and not defer it to her 'friend.' An imaginary friend should never be dismissed, instead, engage her 'friend' by telling your child to have her imaginary friend 'help' her clean up the mess.

In extreme cases imaginary friends may become villainized. "The child says the [imaginary] friend told her to do something harmful," says Dr. Markham. She acknowledges that these cases are rare and the majority of parents need not worry about their child's behavior taking on a dark tone. However, if you fear your daughter exhibits these behaviors, it's important to have her evaluated by a mental health provider.

- *Extreme withdrawal and isolation.* Dr. Markham encourages parents to step-in if they notice their child is only communicating with their imaginary friend to the exclusion of everyone else. Severe isolation and withdrawal from people and things your daughter used to enjoy can be a sign of depression or other mental illness.

As with many parenting situations, intuition is crucial. If you feel your daughter's relationship with her imaginary friend is unhealthy or troubling, contact your pediatrician. But chances are, your daughter is just expressing her creativity and unique perspective of the world around her. Who knows, maybe one day she will be the next Oscar winning screen writer or Pulitzer Prize winning author!