

# Understanding and Managing Your Child's Imaginary Friend



## Highlights

Many children have an imaginary friend, which might be a made-up person or creature that seems real to them.

Imaginary friends are a way for your child to be creative and develop social skills.

There are things you can do to manage any issues with your child's imaginary friend.

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**What is an imaginary friend?**

Young children often have active imaginations and may imagine having a friend who is not really there. This imaginary friend can be:

- Someone they already know
- A character from a story or movie
- An animal
- A completely imaginary creature

The imaginary friend may be with your child all the time, come and go, or appear at certain times and in certain places. Some children may also speak to their stuffed animals and toys as if they are real.

### **Are imaginary friends normal?**

Studies show that 60% of children have an imaginary friend at some point in their lives. These friendships typically begin around age 2 and can last until the school years. While the friendship usually lasts for a few months, some children may have imaginary friends for several years.

### **Why does my child have an imaginary friend?**

Children create imaginary friends for various reasons, including:

- Exploring a concept
- Needing help solving problems
- Seeking comfort or a friend
- Learning to control emotions
- Exploring roles, such as feeling in charge or in control
- Engaging in fantasy play

Imaginary friends can help your child:

- Express their feelings
- Have someone to play with
- Develop social skills
- Build creativity

### **What should I do about my child's imaginary friend?**

If your child has an imaginary friend, it's okay for you to interact with them, but don't get too involved. Let your child be in control of their imaginary friend and playtime to help develop their social skills.

Imaginary friends can also help you understand your child better. For example, if the imaginary friend is afraid of something, your child may be afraid of the same thing.

### **How should I handle issues with imaginary friends?**

If your child blames the imaginary friend for something, use it as a teaching moment. For instance, if your child says their imaginary friend spilled water, you can explain that mistakes happen and they should help the imaginary friend clean up.

If your child prefers playing with an imaginary friend instead of real children, they may need support in making real-world friends.

### **When should I be concerned about my child's imaginary friend?**

While imaginary friends are typically a normal part of development, in some cases, they may indicate issues if:

- They appear after a traumatic event
- The child has special educational needs

If you are concerned about your child, talking to a doctor may help. Additionally, if the imaginary friend is mean or scary and causes distress to your child, it's important to address these concerns and help your child cope with these emotions.

### **Tools And Assistance**

If you need more support, consider speaking to a maternal child health nurse. Additionally, tools such as child development resources, parenting apps, and child psychology consultations can provide further assistance in understanding and managing your child's interactions with imaginary friends.

