

The power of pretend friends

by Anne Cassidy

Imaginary playmates help kids face their fears and practice social skills while having fun



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Before we had children, our house was just a house—nice, warm and comfortable, but a little empty. Then we had kids, and it filled up quickly—not just with the toys and baby paraphernalia I'd expected, but with imaginary creatures great and small. They were the invention of Suzanne, our oldest daughter, who began talking about them when she was two and a half. First came vague allusions to someone named Sukie, an elfin creature who flitted through Suzanne's conversations when she

was still learning to put sentences together. Six months later we began to hear about Vampire, who slept under the bed. Despite his grim name he seemed more guardian angel than anything else, because he protected Suzanne from other monsters. I imagined him as tall, cheerful, a little bumbling. Shortly after Vampire's arrival, Suzanne began talking about Puppy Wuppy, who despite his warm, fuzzy name would occasionally throw food on the floor. He also drove Suzanne to swimming class

sometimes, much to my dismay, because he was a terrible driver. I soon heard about two more creatures, Pickarts and Little Fishy. Their natures were less distinct, but they always showed up when there was a gathering of the imaginary clan.

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py's table manners) and, unlike her real friends, didn't have to be driven home after a playdate.

"My message to parents is to welcome imaginary friends," says Charles Schaefer, PhD, a psychologist and professor at Fairleigh Dickinson University in Teaneck, New Jersey, who has studied imaginary companions. "They help youngsters entertain themselves and develop their imaginations."

"You should enjoy this time when your child is unself-consciously imaginative," comments Mary Renck Jalongo, PhD, a professor of early-childhood education at Indiana University of Pennsylvania. "It's like having an observation window into his mind."

Where pretend friends live
Imaginary companions are most likely to befriend children two and a half to six years old. Studies have shown that anywhere from a third to more than half of preschoolers have some form of imaginary playmate. The exact percentage depends upon whom you talk to. When Dorothy G. and

Jerome L. Singer, psychologists and authors of *The House of Make-Believe* (Harvard University Press), polled a group of children and their parents, 65 percent of the youngsters but only 55 percent of their parents said yes when asked if there was some form of make-believe friend on the premises.

"I think children sometimes go underground with their imaginary companions and play with them privately," says Jalongo, explaining similar findings in her own studies of children's imaginary playmates.

What type of child is most likely to develop a pretend friend? Not surprisingly, only children and those at least five years older or younger than their closest sibling—youngsters who spend more time alone and fill their solitude with make-believe people. Children who spend much of their time in day care settings appear less likely to invent pretend friends. "We really don't see imaginary friends much in a child care situation," says Marcy Guddemi, PhD, vice president for education and research at Kinder-Care Learning Centers, Inc. "Of

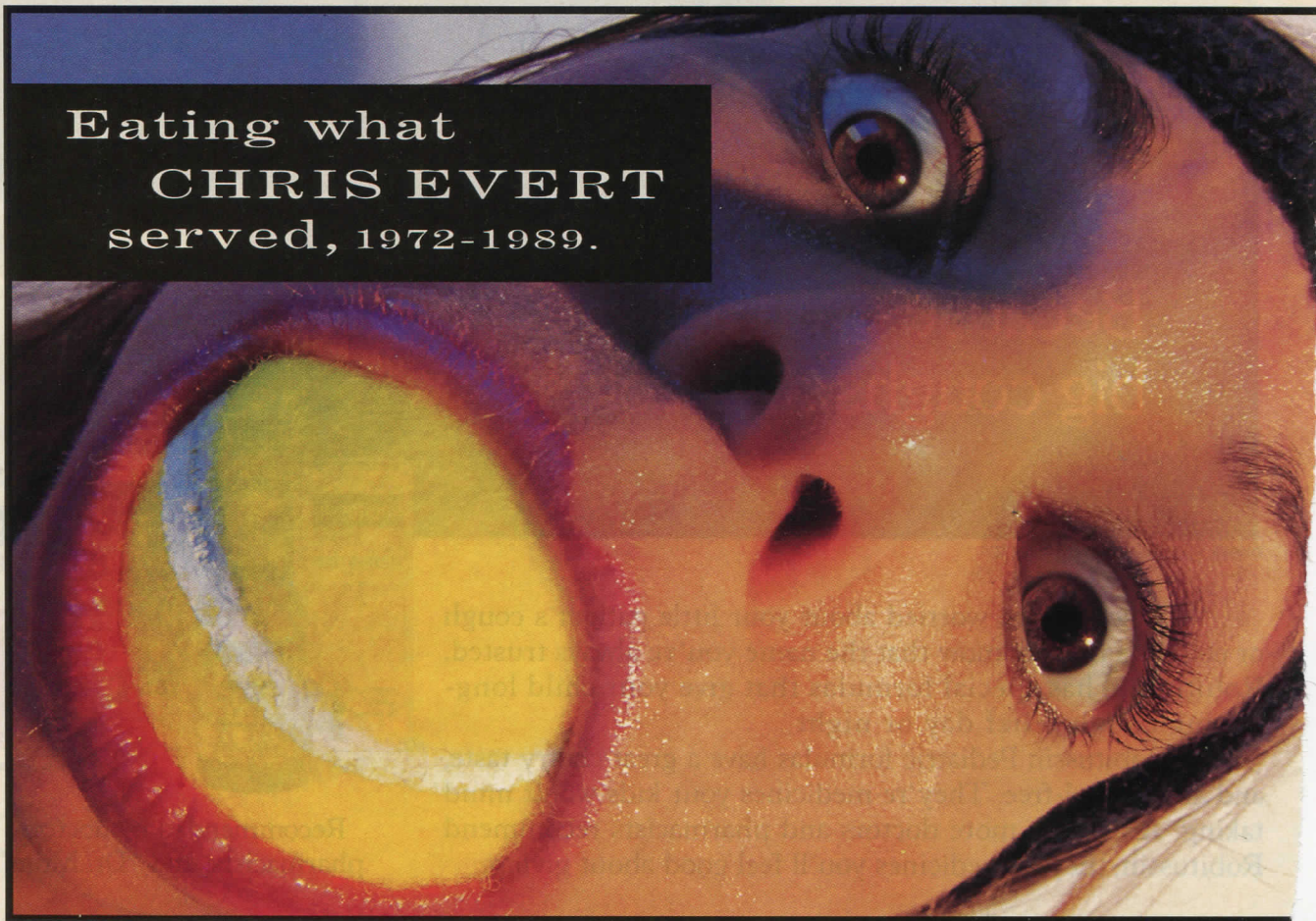


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course, when we do see children with make-believe companions we value and encourage this development because it's part of the important stage of pretend play."

Girls and boys are equally likely to have imaginary companions, although the Singers' research shows that parents are more apt to think

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their daughters have one than their sons. Experts believe that creative adolescents or adults tend to have had pretend friends in childhood. "And children who are heavy viewers of television seem less likely to develop them," says Jerome Singer, who is a professor of psychology at Yale. "They get caught up in television and don't rely on their own imagination as much."

Putting faces on invisible pals. What do pretend friends look like? Sometimes animals, sometimes people, sometimes a little of both. Though I always assumed that Puppy Wuppy was a dog, for instance, I learned much later that "he's actually a director, Mommy." A director of what, I never learned, but I also discovered that Vampire is "actually a dentist."

Some children's pretend friends are derived from storybook or TV characters. Four-year-old Dashiell Morrison's imaginary worm, Slimy, probably comes from a *Sesame Street* character, says his mother. No matter who or what they look like now, one of the best things about pretend

friends is that they can change in the blink of an eye. "They're an imaginary tool," Jalongo says. They're infinitely malleable, anything the child wants them to be.

Learning to be sociable

When young children spend time with imaginary friends, it's a good way for the kids to practice social skills. They can talk to their pretend friends (and 90 percent of kids do, according to the Singers' research) and rehearse conversations they'll later have with real people. In their book, the Singers report several examples of children who created imaginary companions and gave them traits the kids wished they had themselves. One painfully shy boy named Allen invented Gerry, who could do many things Allen couldn't, and had a plane he let Allen fly.

Imaginary friends help children face fears. I know that Suzanne was much braver at bedtime with Vampire by her side. In her book *The Magic Years* (Scribner's), Selma Fraiberg talks about her niece, who conquered her fear of tigers by in-

venting an imaginary one and ordering it around.

Speaking of ordering it around, one of the best things about an imaginary companion is that it's at the beck and call of the child who created it. A youngster can invite the friend to play whenever he wants to, choose a game he prefers and decide when his friend goes home. Having an imaginary friend helps a child learn how it feels to be in charge.

"Young children's lives are controlled by adults to a great extent," Jalongo says. "They are told what to eat, what to wear and when to go to bed. But they can control their imaginary friends." When Michelle O'Brien asked her four-year-old daughter, Caitlin, to turn off the television set, she told her mother, "Bane did it for me." Bane, one of six imaginary friends who live in the O'Brien house, appears regularly in family pictures Caitlin draws.



Pranks and pitfalls

Of course, imaginary companions *do* misbehave. Bane sometimes shoves Caitlin's baby brother, Jamie. Pre-



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Keep your distance. Imaginary companions are usually shy around grownups

tend friends have also been known to snatch cookies, spill milk, overturn chairs and write on walls. Though the scapegoat aspect of imaginary companions may stand out in parents' minds, Jalongo says interviews with children indicate they don't find it that important. "Of course," she laughs, "maybe they just don't

want to talk about it," but her research shows that children appreciate imaginary friends because they like to spend time with them—not because they need to blame them.

Unless your child seems so preoccupied with his make-believe companion that he refuses to play with anyone else, having one does not mean he has a problem. Shy or maladjusted children aren't more likely to have pretend friends, either. "If anything," say the Singers, "the evidence that a child has an imaginary playmate seems to be an especially powerful predictor that a child will play happily in nursery school, will be cooperative with friends and adults and may use somewhat more extensive language."

Nurturing make-believe friends

As beneficial as imaginary playmates may be, they can't be conjured up at will by parents who think they'd make a nice addition to their children's play list. Only your child can create them. But you can foster an environment that welcomes them. And

once they're living in your house, there are things you can do to guarantee they'll stay awhile.

- **Give your child some space and privacy.** He may be in day care or school for much of the week, so be sure you don't overschedule his weekends. Give him as much time alone as you possibly can.

- **Cut back on television.** If your child watches a lot of TV, gradually curtail his habit. As mentioned above, research shows that heavy television viewers are less likely to conjure up an imaginary friend.

- **Never belittle or humiliate a youngster for talking to or about someone you can't see.** Remember, she's created this pretend friend, so respect him or her (or it)!

- **Play along, within reason.** If a parent leaves a space at the dinner table and goes along with the child in other ways, that's fine, according to Jerome Singer. On the other hand, it's all right to let your youngster know that you realize this friend is different from his real pals. At some level, your child knows his playmate





is pretend, and he expects you to know this also.

• **Keep your distance.** Imaginary friends are shy around grownups. If you ask too much about them or try to carry on conversations with them, they're likely to move away. Your child wants to be in control of them, and when you come too close, you're threatening that.

• **Encourage your child in dramatic play.** Children who are encouraged to think creatively may be more likely to devise their own imaginary friends and worlds. Try pantomime, role-playing and puppet shows. Be sure your child has a chance to manipulate dollhouses and other miniature worlds. "Set aside a special time for creative activities," says Charles Schaefer. Make imagination a part of your routine. Help stuffed animals "talk" to your child. Look at the clouds together and talk about the castles and unicorns in the sky. Once your child is in school, keep her imagination alive by encouraging drama, art, music, crafts—whatever strikes her fancy.



• **Read all about it.** Two lovely books about imaginary companions are: *Al- do*, by John Burningham (Crown), and *Jessica*, by Kevin Henkes (Greenwillow Books). Schaefer recommends a book called *Put Your Mother on the Ceiling*, by Richard De Mille (Penguin), to inspire fantasy play in older children.

When Mary Jalongo asked first- and second-graders how they felt about the imaginary friends they *used* to have, they said things like "When I was a little kid, I used to pretend I had a whole circus in my room, and I had a clown who was my special friend. But you know, now that I'm in school I don't talk about him anymore." It was touching, observes Jalongo, the way the youngsters remembered their imaginary friends so fondly and wistfully.

It's rare for imaginary companions to linger much past the age of six or seven. School, peer pressure and a host of interests crowd them out. But if you had a make-believe friend as a child, chances are you remember that special person quite clearly. "Some

creative people draw on their imaginary companions the rest of their lives. They use them in stories, plays or movies," says Singer, citing Steven Spielberg and E.T. as an example. Or they cast them in tales they tell their own children. Imaginary companions may tread lightly, but they leave large footprints.

Suzanne is six years old now and in kindergarten. Our daughter Claire is three and has no imaginary friends, perhaps because she's always had a big sister to play with. Suzanne still talks about her pals, but rarely and fleetingly. When I mentioned I hadn't heard about Vampire much lately, she said, "Oh, he's on vacation." Puppy Wuppy has traded in his chauffeur's license and become a dingy and much-loved stuffed animal. Sukie, Pickarts and Little Fishy are but dim memories. But sometimes a look will come over Suzanne's face, a vague, faraway smile that makes me wonder if she's spotted Vampire again, and if he's watching over her still. WWW

Anne Cassidy is a freelance writer and the mother of three children.