

Make-Believe Buddies, Pretend Pals, and Creative Creatures: What You Need to Know About Your Child's Imaginary Friend

"Nappy's dad drives the hardest working truck on the road," 3 1/2-year-old Soren Johnson proclaimed to his father, Cory, while driving in their red pick-up truck on their way to an MSU men's basketball game. Once again, Nappy had one-upped the Johnson family, as he always did. Sometime's Nappy's mommy baked better muffins than Soren's mom, Meredith, and on other occasions, Nappy didn't have to share his toys with his younger sister, Tappy—unlike Soren, who was expected to share with his little sister, Doretta.

Whether your son or daughter's imaginary friend raises the bar on the quality of baked goods in your home, or is a constant presence in your family's life—requiring you to set an extra place at the dining room table—imaginary friends can be a very positive part of childhood.

"They are an inexpensive, easily accessible way to channel your child's creativity and social skills," says Jodi Murray, licensed counselor, and Parent Liaison for Bozeman's Thrive program, as well as a mother of two young children.

In fact, the notion that having an imaginary friend indicates a child could be mentally unstable, socially secluded or insecure is old news. The Freudian psychologist made famous by his numerous books on infant and child care, Dr. Benjamin Spock, espoused such an idea, leading to the misconception that the maintenance of an imaginary friend ought to be discouraged in the young child.

In dismissal of this philosophy, Hallie Bornstein, a Licensed Psychologist working in Bozeman as well as in Missoula suggests, "[Parents] should provide an environment where children can feel free to use their imaginations as much as possible."

Thankfully, current research has dispelled Spock's theory, embracing the imaginative process that so many children delve into. Marjorie Taylor and Stephanie Carlson, Professors of Psychology at the University of Oregon, and University of Washington, respectively, have recently published a study that suggests 65% of U.S. seven-year-olds admit to having had an imaginary friend at some point in their recent past. Similar research suggests that not only is the presence of an imaginary companion common for young people, but it can actually be *beneficial*.

When children are allowed to explore the world of imaginary friends, they find a way to process and move past sad, hurtful or confusing things that might have happened in their real life.

Seven-year-old Maegan Wacker describes her invisible confidante, Sarah, as a person she can talk to when she's sad or lonely, or just wants someone to hang around with.

"She showed up when I was playing in the back yard," Maegan explains excitedly, flashing a toothless grin. "She came all the way from Australia...she has greenish eyes,

long black hair, and wears these same kind of shoes,” Wacker indicates the Sketchers tennis shoes she has on her own feet.

“And what’s one of the most special things about Sarah?” Maegan’s mom, Jen, encourages her. “What does Sarah do for you at night time?”

“Oh, yeah! She goes upstairs to my bedroom before me to make sure there aren’t any monsters,” Maegan confides boldly.

Beyond helping to quell a young child’s fears or momentary loneliness, the presence of an imaginary friend can have positive effects that can last a life time. The social dynamics a child acts out while engaging with her make-believe buddy can help her to develop qualities like empathy, cooperation, and an advanced vocabulary, as well as boost her ability to alter her vantage point for a given situation. And many parents of children with imaginary friends are thankful for the extra time it allots *them* over the course of a day.

“When Soren was really into Nappy, he would come and visit at least ten times a day,” recalls Meredith, when asked about how much of a constant her son’s pretend pal was in his life. Children who engage in this type of creative play are typically better at entertaining themselves than children who are less likely to spend time in their own little make-believe world.

And don’t be surprised if your child’s “friend” is something other than a boy or girl. Animals and creatures from another world are just as likely to become invisible companions as an imagined child.

“We often see that children who are in an a situation where they don’t feel empowered, create an imaginary friend that is *younger* than they are—giving them the chance to have power over something, or someone else,” explains Murray. She goes on to suggest that not only should we feel comfortable encouraging our children to engage in imaginative play as often as possible, but that we should join in the fun too. “It’s a great way to get down on their level,” she says, reflecting on her own play time with her four-year-old daughter Ava.

“The only time we should worry is when we don’t see them forming other social relationships by age seven,” Murray instructs, “or if they can’t distinguish between fantasy and reality. Otherwise, just let them be.”

Dr. Jerome Singer, Professor of Psychology at Yale University defines “imagination” as, “A basic human capacity to create images, fantasies, and thoughts not in the immediate environment.” He goes on to suggest that a child’s imagination allows him to think of the world around him, not as it is in the present, but how it *could* be. If this is true, then couldn’t we all stand to use our imaginations a little more?