Imaginary Companions
and the Children
Who Create Them

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CHAPTERS 1-4

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Introduction

Imaginary companions often get bad press. In movies and novels, they tend to be equated with psychological disturbance. Look what happens to Danny Torrance, the child character in the movie based on Stephen King's novel *The Shining.* Near the beginning of the story, Danny describes Tony, a small invisible boy who lives in his mouth and gives him advice whenever he needs it. This movie is filled with shots of a haunted hotel, an elevator filled with blood, and violent deaths, yet one of the most psychologically chilling scenes occurs when Danny becomes so traumatized by the unfolding events that he is no longer able to function. In this scene, Danny's mother finds him in a trancelike state and tries to rouse him by shaking him, repeating his name, and telling him to wake up. When the boy responds, it is in the distinctive monotonic voice of Tony saying, "Danny can't wake up, Mrs. Torrance... Danny's gone away, Mrs. Torrance."

Although, even in the movies, pretend friends don't usually commandeer children's bodies, they are often depicted as the inventions of lonely, unhappy children. In the movie *Bogus,* about a boy who creates an imaginary friend at a time of personal crisis, the child protagonist is laughed at by other children, runs away from home, and for a time seems lost in a fantasy world. The popular comic strip, *Calvin and Hobbes,* presents a humorous depiction of imaginary companions, but still raises questions about the type of child who has one. We enjoy Calvin's wild imagination and his exploits with his stuffed tiger, Hobbes, but in real life, we wouldn't laugh at a boy who
did so poorly in school and had no real-life friends. Calvin's long-suffering teacher counts the days until retirement, his mother reads child psychology books to find out where she went wrong, and his father questions whether they should have become parents at all! Even Bill Watterson, the creator of Calvin and Hobbes, says he wouldn't want a child like Calvin in his home.²

No wonder some parents worry about the implications of their children having imaginary companions. And it is not just popular culture that gives imaginary companions a bad reputation. Early psychological research on this topic often suggested negative implications.³ The silver lining in these studies was that imaginary companions also tended to be interpreted as signs of special intelligence or creativity, a possibility that shows up in some portrayals in the media. A comedy sketch on Saturday Night Live some years ago depicted two parents fighting over whose child had the better (i.e., more unique, detailed, creative) imaginary companion. In fact, some parents have expressed concern to me about their children not having imaginary companions. They wonder if this is a negative sign regarding their children's intellectual or creative potential.

So what does having an imaginary companion mean? What is the likelihood that a child might become so engrossed in an imaginary world as to lose touch with reality altogether? Is the creation of an imaginary companion the first sign of mental illness? Is it an early marker of special intelligence? These are some of the questions addressed in this book. The answers come from an analysis of psychological research with young children. Many of the older studies that painted a negative picture of imaginary companions had methodological problems. More reliable information collected in recent years indicates that fantasy play is an important component of children's cognitive and emotional development. More specifically, the creation of an imaginary companion is healthy and relatively common.

This is not to say that the stereotype portrayed in movies is without basis in reality. A child like the boy in Bogus who lost his mother and had to move to a new and strange place would be a likely candidate for having an imaginary companion. The creation of a pretend friend in such cases can be an adaptive response on the part of the child for dealing with difficult issues in his or her life. Fantasy allows a child to work on a variety of concerns, fears, and problems. More often, though, children pretend to have an imaginary friend simply because it is fun. The view that is emerging from recent research is that the children who create pretend friends are very social people who particularly enjoy interacting with others. When no one is around to play with, these children make someone up.

Chapter 2 is devoted to defining "imaginary companion." Thus far I have used the term as if everyone knows exactly what I am talking about, but there are lots of play activities that parents and others might consider having an imaginary friend. Does the friend have to be invisible to count as an imaginary companion or are children's teddy bears and other toys also potential candidates? Does the imaginary friend have to be nice? What about imaginary friends whose mean or scary behavior makes them more like imaginary enemies?

Although for research purposes, children tend to be categorized as either having or not having an imaginary companion, I consider this dichotomy to be misleading or at least simplistic. Many children have several imaginary friends at a time, and some acquire new ones as others disappear. Children may also have sustained and elaborate fantasies that do not easily fit into what we label as an "imaginary companion." For example, many preschool children pretend to be an animal or another person on a regular basis—they take on the imaginary character and act it out, rather than pretend it is a separate entity from themselves. Chapter 2 provides descriptive information about the kinds of pretense that might be considered examples of imaginary companions, as well as some variations on the theme.

Chapter 3 describes the research investigating possible differences between children who create imaginary companions and those who do not. The importance of the definitional issues discussed in Chapter 2 immediately becomes clear when we consider this literature. One of the challenges of interpreting the research findings is that there has been considerable variation from study to study in what is included in the category "imaginary companion." However, the general picture emerging from recent studies is that, in most respects, the similarities between the two groups of children are more striking than their differences. When differences are found, they tend to turn the stereotype of children who have imaginary companions on its head. Children with imaginary companions appear to be less shy, more able to focus their attention, and to have advanced social understanding when compared with other children.

Another type of potential difference between children with and
Introduction

Children seem to know exactly what is going on. They might think Santa Claus and the Tooth Fairy are real, but they are quite knowledgeable about the fantasy status of the people, creatures, and objects that are the figments of their own imaginations.

In Chapter 6, I discuss the ultimate fate of imaginary companions. What happens to them? When and why are they given up? Not much is known about how these fantasies end, but the available evidence suggests that children simply move on to other things. In most cases, no well-marked event leads to the imaginary companion's disappearance—it simply fades away. Many parents report that children abandon their imaginary companions at about 6 years of age when they start school, but there is reason to question this commonly held assumption. Some pretend friends are retained much longer, and sometimes imaginary companions first appear when the children are well beyond the preschool years. For some of these older children, fantasies about imaginary characters become increasingly elaborate until entire fantasy worlds are created for them to inhabit. The imaginary companions of older children are described in Chapter 7, along with adult behaviors that I consider similar to having an imaginary companion.

In Chapter 8, I summarize some of the main points of this book and discuss the larger issues raised by the study of imaginary companions. The bottom line is that although imaginary companions and other fantasies have sometimes been interpreted as signs of emotional disturbance, a break with reality, or even the emergence of multiple personalities, they really are just a variation on the theme of all the pretend play that is going on in the preschool years, a period sometimes referred to as "the high season of imaginative play." I hope this book will help explain some of the reasons for our misconceptions about imaginary companions, while stressing the important role played by such fantasies in the cognitive and emotional development of healthy children.
What Are Imaginary Companions Like?

One 4-year-old who participated in our research told us about two invisible birds named Nutsy and Nutsy (a male and a female) who lived in a tree outside her bedroom window. According to the child, the two Nutsys had brightly colored feathers, were about 12 inches tall, and talked incessantly. Sometimes the little girl was irritated by the clumsy and generally raucous behavior of these birds, but usually their silliness made her laugh. The child’s parents were well aware of the Nutsys; they regularly observed their daughter talking and playing with them, and they were frequently informed about the Nutsys’ opinions and activities. In fact, Nutsy and Nutsy were almost like part of the family. The birds went along on outings by riding on top of the car, they had their own places set at the dinner table, and their antics were enjoyed by all. I met the Nutsys myself one day when they accompanied the little girl to my lab. I provided a chair for them, and the little girl laughed at how funny they looked as they stood on tiptoe to peer over the table at her. Two years after she first told us about Nutsy and Nutsy, the child still remembered them, and her mother reported that she and her daughter sometimes reminisced about their exploits.

Elaborate invisible creatures like Nutsy and Nutsy who are played with for an extended period of time and are described consistently by both the child and her parents would fit almost anyone’s definition of an imaginary companion. However, there are many variations on the imaginary companion theme. The animals and people who populate children’s fantasy lives differ in their vividness, personality de-

velopment, and the extent to which they have some basis in the real world. Some children have an imaginary version of a real friend or adopt a character from a movie or book as an imaginary companion (e.g., Ariel from the Walt Disney movie The Little Mermaid). Other children use a favorite stuffed toy, their own image in a mirror, or their hands as props in their pretense. Sometimes the props are more idiosyncratic. There is one documented case of a child who had an ongoing (and rather stormy) relationship with the chest of drawers in his bedroom, speaking to it as if it were aware of his thoughts and behaviors. In another case, a little girl had friends she called Leafies who lived in an aspen tree in her backyard.

Fantasy people and animals also vary in the length of time they inhabit a child’s imagination. Sometimes imaginary companions are stable, long-lived, and played with regularly. They may even be passed down from one child to the next in a family, like outgrown but still serviceable clothes. Other pretend friends have a much more transitory existence, drifting in and out of the child’s fantasy life. In our research, we have encountered children whose lives were crowded with imaginary people and animals, none of which lingered for long. Other children had only one or two imaginary companions at a time, but they updated their friends frequently, for example, trading in a blue-eyed blond boy named Tompy for a mischievous female mouse named Gadget. In some cases, children have described an army of Martians or a host of lizards rather than a solitary individual. In fact, it is common for children to have two or more imaginary companions.

Given the diversity in children’s fantasy play, parents are often unsure if their own child would be considered to have an imaginary companion. This makes it difficult for parents to decide if the research findings about imaginary companions are relevant to their children. In this chapter, I discuss in some detail what imaginary companions are like, and the different sources of information that researchers have used to identify the children who have them.

What counts as an “imaginary companion”?

**Invisible friends versus stuffed animals**

Many young children endow a stuffed animal, doll, or other toy with a stable personality and treat it as if it were real—talking to it, mak-
ing a special voice for it, and consulting it about problems. This type of pretend play is the basis of Bill Watterson's comic strip Calvin and Hobbes about a small boy and his stuffed tiger companion. One might also think of Winnie the Pooh, the teddy bear friend of Christopher Robin in A. A. Milne's children's books, or the toy bunny in The Velveteen Rabbit. Parents often ask if special toys are examples of imaginary companions.

Experts on childhood fantasy differ in their opinions about toys. In the past, the term "imaginary companion" was restricted to fantasy friends who were invisible, excluding cases in which toys were used as props. For example, in one of the first widely read articles on the subject, published in 1934, Dr. Margaret Svedsen of the Institute for Juvenile Research in Chicago defined an imaginary companion as "an invisible character, named and referred to in conversation with other persons or played with directly for a period of time, at least several months, having an air of reality for the child but no apparent objective basis. This excludes that type of imaginative play in which an object is personified, or in which the child himself assumes the role of some person in his environment." In order to be absolutely clear about her definition, Svedsen gave the following real life example:

Shortly before her second birthday Mary referred to "Tagar," her imaginary companion. She led Tagar around on an imaginary string. Food was kept for it under the radiator where it also slept; she always fed it on the floor. It was particularly fond of ice cream, as she was. "Berrie and Auntie" followed Tagar, appearing when she was about 3-1/2 years of age. They were two persons, but lived together. Mary would put places for them at the family table. Although dishes and silver were laid and Mary would ask if they had enough, real food was never offered them. On other occasions, she would seize the opportunity at meal-time to tell her father all the things which they had done. Mary might be punished but they never were, and never did anything wrong. Berrie and Auntie frequently accompanied her and her parents on outings, and on several occasions she attempted to draw her real companion into play with them, by insisting that she talk with them on the telephone.

Of the 111 children in Svedsen's sample, 13.4 percent were identified as having imaginary companions. Her estimate is quite low, in part because the children ranged in age from 3 to 16 years, and it is likely that at least some of the older children had forgotten the imaginary friends they had when they were younger. And what about the omission of stuffed animals and other toys? It seems to me that at least in some cases, toys function quite well as imaginary companions. Certainly if a little boy similar to Watterson's Calvin participated in my research, I would want him to be in the group of children described as having imaginary companions.

One argument for excluding stuffed animals is that they have an existence and physical appearance that is independent of the child's imagination. Perhaps a companion is only truly imaginary when it exists solely in the mind's eye of the child and none of the details are specified by the environment. The trouble with this reasoning is that play with stuffed animals and play with invisible imaginary companions are not as different as one might think with regard to how much imagination is involved. According to Kendall Walton, professor of philosophy at the University of Michigan, the experience of imagining an entity such as an imaginary bear is apt to be more vivid if an actual object serves as a prop. And clearly, children use their imaginations to embellish the appearance of toys that serve as imaginary companions. In the child's mind, the imagined friend based on a toy might look quite different from the way the toy appears to a more impartial observer. The mother sees a scruffy little stuffed dog that she would like to whisk away for a quick cycle through the washing machine, but to the child, the dog appears large, fluffy, and graceful.

This insight is captured in Watterson's technique of drawing the stuffed tiger in his comic strip very differently depending on whether the reader is seeing Hobbes as he appears to Calvin (i.e., a large, expressive, and lifelike beast) or as he appears to another character in the cartoon (i.e., a small inert toy). Ronald Benson and David Pryor of the Department of Psychiatry at the University of Michigan described this kind of discrepancy in perspective when they asked a 16-year-old girl to show them the stuffed dog that had served as her childhood companion. When she located the dog in the back of her closet, she was shocked to see how tattered and worn it was. She felt she was seeing the toy for the first time as it appeared to other people.

The distinction between stuffed animals and invisible imaginary companions is also blurred because parents frequently respond to their child's expression of interest in a particular kind of animal by supplying him or her with a toy version of it. One adult who participated in my research recalled that her mother asked her lots of
questions about the imaginary companion she had as a small child (an invisible "Mouse-Mouse") and then made a stuffed animal to her daughter's specifications, complete with brown fur and blue-flowered super-hero cape.

More commonly, parents simply buy toys that correspond to the type of animals their children are imagining in their play. One 5-year-old in our research began creating fantasies about dolphins when she was 2 years old. Her father reported that she used to pretend to hold tiny dolphins in her hands and to give them to family members. Because of her interest in dolphins, the parents gave her a stuffed dolphin that became the prop for an imaginary companion named Dipper. When asked to describe Dipper, the child did not describe the physical attributes of her toy (a small, gray plush dolphin), but instead reported that Dipper was "the size of a door," had sparkles and stripes (unlike "a regular dolphin"), and lived far away on a star. These same details were repeated when the child was interviewed a year later. In her pretend play with dolphins, this child moved flexibly between interacting with an entirely invisible friend and using a toy as a prop in her play. I also know cases in which a child first used a toy as an imaginary companion and later invented an invisible version of the friend.

If we decide that stuffed animals, dolls, and other toys sometimes function as imaginary companions, a new problem arises. How do we distinguish between toys that are imaginary companions and toys that are not? After all, the majority of children have a stuffed animal or a doll. A toy that is played with from time to time, but spends most of its time on the shelf, would obviously not warrant the label "imaginary companion." Other toys are special, but not in the same way as an imaginary companion. For example, some children have a teddy bear that they habitually cling to, sleep with, and use for comfort. Toys, blankets, and other items used in this way by young children are referred to as "transitional objects." Transitional objects are of interest to psychologists because they are believed to help some children work out the distinction between self and other, but enjoying the comfort of a soft toy is not the same as creating a distinct personality for it.

Professors Dorothy Singer and Jerome Singer, leading authorities on children's imagination and authors of The House of Make-Believe, chose to include stuffed animals and dolls as possible imaginary companions in their research conducted at Yale University. They distinguished the toys serving as imaginary companions from other playthings in the following way: "Our data do include parents' reports of their children's transformations of stuffed animals, which assume human-like properties. We did not, however, count teddy bears or dolls where these were simply carried around or treated in the concrete fashion of the transitional object. Rather, to be included they had to be endowed by the child with definite human qualities and be treated as a friend or playmate." The inclusion of toys helps to account for why Singer and Singer report that about 65 percent of children have imaginary companions, an estimate more than four times higher than Svendsen's.

Dr. Jennifer Mauro, a clinical psychologist who is an expert on imaginary companions, explicitly mentioned toys when explaining to the children in her research what she meant by a pretend friend. "Pretend friends are like dolls or toys that you pretend are real or people that you pretend are real. They are make-believe friends. Do you have a pretend friend?" Of the imaginary companions described in response to this question, 41 percent turned out to be invisible people, 19 percent were invisible animals, and 39 percent were dolls or stuffed animals. Like Singer and Singer, Mauro estimated the incidence of imaginary companions to be quite high—more than 50 percent of young children.

Clearly, the decision to include or exclude stuffed animals or dolls as imaginary companions has a large effect on how common one believes the phenomenon to be. Some psychologists have taken an intermediate stance when it comes to stuffed animals, resulting in estimates that fall between Svendsen's and Singer and Singer's. For example, John and Elizabeth Newson, two British psychologists who have conducted extensive research on the lives of young children, estimated that 22 percent of 4-year-olds have imaginary companions. For the most part these researchers excluded stuffed animals or dolls as imaginary companions, but in a few cases they relented. "It was clearly necessary to admit a character to the fantasy category because, although having a 'real' origin, so extensive a saga had been built upon this foundation that fantasy had long since out-stripped reality." In fact, the Newsons' own daughter had such elaborate fantasies about her doll Susanna that they decided to interview the child about her 4-year-old daughter (the doll) in the same way that they interviewed real parents about their children. The transcript—a 4-year-old's view of her supposedly 4-year-old child and her opinions
on its upbringing—is published as an appendix at the end of Newson and Newson's book *Four Years Old in an Urban Community*.

This example indicates that young children sometimes build detailed fantasies involving their toys. The pretense can go well beyond play with one special stuffed animal or doll. One of my graduate students recently told me about an elaborate network of social relationships involving the many stuffed animals she had as a young child:

I attributed various personality traits to each animal and treated them according to my beliefs about each one. For example, one of the animals was a stuffed bear who was far older and considerably more tattered than my other animals. I worried that he would think I liked the other animals better because of their more attractive appearance, so I made a special effort to reassure him that I loved him just as much as the others. I also had concerns about the larger animals bullying the smaller ones. I remember telling these larger animals to remember to be extra kind and gentle to the littler ones.

Occasionally, conflict arose in my relationships with the animals. The conflicts usually centered around one of two events: my receiving a new stuffed animal or toy, and times when I left home on a trip and had to choose which animal would travel with me. In the case where I was given a new stuffed animal for Christmas or my birthday, I reassured the other animals that I still loved them as much as I always had, and that an "addition to the family" would have no impact on my relationships with them. I would then engage in an elaborate procedure of introducing the new animal to each of the older ones. I presumed that the new animal would be shy in his new home, and reassured him that we would all get along with each other.

When I traveled away from home with my family, I was allowed to take only one animal. I remember agonizing over the decision, not wanting to hurt anyone's feelings. I eventually developed a rotating system that allowed each animal to essentially go on the same number of trips as any other animal. Before each trip, I carefully selected the animal who would accompany me, and then proceeded to have a "meeting" with all of the animals together. I would tell them to the best of my ability where I was going, how long I would be gone, and what I expected to do on the trip. I reassured the animals who were staying behind that I would take them all if I could, but due to parental constraints I had been forced to choose one of them. I tried to make it clear to all of them that I was doing my best to be fair, and that they would all eventually go on a trip with me. In addition to this elaborate clarification of my motives for choosing the animal that I had, I felt the need to protect the animal who was going with me from possible retaliation from the other animals upon our return. I

pleaded with the other animals to be kind to the one who had been selected. I also advised the animal who had been selected to refrain from bragging about how much fun the trip had been, as this would only provoke the other animals.

Such reports from adults remembering their childhoods, together with observations of young children, demonstrate that pretense involving the animation of toys can be elaborate, vivid, and important to young children. Perhaps these examples will help parents determine if their own child's toy serves as an imaginary companion. This decision is harder for researchers who have more limited information about the way the child plays with the toy. There is a blurry line between toys that serve as props for imaginary companions and other more run-of-the-mill playthings. We also do not know the extent to which imaginative play with toy props has the same sorts of emotional and cognitive consequences as play with invisible beings. Perhaps inventing an invisible friend is not exactly the same kind of experience as creating a personality for a special toy, but in most current research on imaginary companions, special toys are included.

**Imaginary Identities**

Another kind of play that seems very similar to having an imaginary companion occurs when children create an imaginary personality or character that they act out themselves. For example, one child we originally thought had an imaginary companion named Applejack (based on the report of the child's mother), turned out to have an imagined character that she impersonated, rather than one she interacted with as a separate individual. The child corrected us over the course of the interview by responding to questions such as "How much do you play with Applejack?" by saying, "No, I am Applejack."

Of course, most children act out a variety of roles in their pretend play with other children. On any given day, one child might be the firefighter, another the monster, and so on. This kind of role playing is common. But some children engage in a kind of impersonation that is much more enduring, for example, a child who pretends to be Superman every day for months. The completeness of the identification and the persistence with which the impersonated identity is maintained distinguishes impersonation from common role playing.
Surprisingly little has been written about children's impersonation of animals and people. One exception is an old study by Louise Ames and Janet Learned conducted at Yale University. Ames and Learned gathered information by interviewing parents and observing children at play. Their data include several fascinating reports of children such as the girl described below, who had some imaginary companions that were invisible and some based on props, and who also impersonated imagined characters.

Imaginary play started around 2 years. She animated her hands and had the fingers talk to each other, before she herself could talk well. Outdoors she used sticks as imaginary people. Later when she could talk she called her hands “hand-duds” when they were acting as imaginary companions. She dressed up her hands with ribbons between the fingers for hair.

At 33 months she talked to imaginary beings in the corners of the room. She would sit at supper and make faces at the corner of the room near the ceiling. Had long conversations with this imaginary friend and was oblivious of the rest of the family. Would talk to the companion, and then makes faces and slight grunting noises in her throat when other person was supposed to be talking to her.

Her most familiar companions are Hankea, Jella and Honia. Hankea is a little girl with a “hanky” around her head. Honia is full of honey, Jella is full of jelly. Honia had a hole in her tummy and a door popped open and the honey popped out. Then all the bees came buzzing around and got the honey. In fact, that is how one gets honey. Sometimes this child changes places with her imaginary friends and she is one of them.

Ames and Learned considered the creation of an imaginary character that is acted out rather than treated as a separate person as an activity that is closely related to playing with an imaginary friend. As an example of animal impersonation, they described a boy who at 24 months visited his grandmother, who had a kitten. “When he got home, he became a kitten and this continued quite consistently till he was 36 months old. He went around on all fours ‘meowing’, lapped up milk. At 30 months he took on, briefly, an additional role, that of his best friend’s dog. In this role he went around on all fours and bit people.” They also provided an example of a girl who pretended to be a boy from 36 months to 60 months: “Mostly she was a boy named ‘Jimmy’ and would not answer if addressed by her own name. Would say, ‘My name is Jimmy.’ If any request were prefaced with ‘Jimmy, will you——?’ she would accede immediately. Sometimes she was a boy other than Jimmy. Occasionally when she did something she was not supposed to do she was Shisky.”

Of the 210 children who participated in Ames and Learned’s study, 17 were observed or described by parents as habitually impersonating animals or people. The eight cases of animal impersonation included three dogs, three cats, a horse, a pig, and a “great big grizzly bear.” The extent of the activity for two of the children was simply saying they were the animals and wanting to be addressed appropriately. However, four were described as carrying out the pretense extensively—“going around on all fours, saying ‘woof woof’ or ‘meow’ instead of talking, lapping up food from a dish on the floor, chasing automobiles, even urinating in animal fashion by standing on one leg.”

It is not surprising that the parents in this study reported that impersonation was more troublesome than other kinds of imaginative play. I too have found that regular impersonation of an imaginary character can be particularly vexing for parents. One mother told us that when company was expected, she and her husband worried whether their sons would be children or cats during the evening. The cat possibility was undesirable because the boys would meow instead of talk, try to eat directly from a plate instead of using silverware, and rub against the legs of the guests in feline fashion.

One of the frustrations is that animals do not understand English and do not talk. When asked to do something (e.g., “Pick up your things and go to bed”), the animal-child is apt to bark or look quizzically at the parent rather than comply. One evening I took my 4-year-old to the home of two clinical psychologists for dinner. As soon as she saw their dog, she became one herself. My requests for her to stop being a dog became pleas, then whispered threats. Amber responded with whimpering dog sounds and licks. I was reluctant to force the issue in front of my colleagues, so I ended up smiling foolishly, while my friends exchanged glances and politely tried to ignore my daughter’s behavior.

Sometimes a child might impersonate a machine rather than an animate being. In his autobiography Sir Peter Ustinov, the British actor, playwright, and director, recalls this type of childhood activity.

I was a motor-car, to the dismay of my parents. Psychiatry was in its infancy then, both expensive and centered in Vienna. There was no one
yet qualified to exercise an internal combustion engine from a small boy. . . . I switched on in the morning, and only stopped being a car at night when I reversed into bed, and cut the ignition."  

Parents of children who behave this way might be helped by the advice Ustinov’s grandfather gave to his mother: “Don’t think of it as the sound of an automobile, but rather as the sound of his imagination developing, and then you will see it will become bearable.”  

Imaginary “friends” that aren’t so friendly  
Most invisible entities in children’s fantasy lives embody the desirable characteristics of a loving friend, but a few might more accurately be called “imaginary enemies.” In fact, Singer and Singer think that Samuel Clemens’s (a.k.a. Mark Twain) childhood imaginary companion was a devil. They base this speculation on the following facts about Clemens: (1) He often included material from his childhood in his novels; (2) In The Mysterious Stranger, Satan is an invisible character that communicates with young boys; and (3) Clemens’s mother referred to Satan frequently in the home.  
Other imaginary companions, if not downright evil, can be unruly, difficult, or scary. For example, a 14-year-old boy who was in bed recovering from a long illness imagined that a picture facing him showed a giant that sometimes stepped out from the wall intent on cutting off his hands. The boy slept with his hands covered for three years. Similarly, Russian psychologist Eugene Subbotsky describes a 4-year-old who developed a fear of a “bamzeli,” a monster who came to the child when he was alone in his bed at night. The child developed a ritual for freeing himself from the bamzeli by holding a rolled-up blanket in his hands, which allowed him to sleep peacefully. One mother told me about her son from age 3 to 5 having an imaginary “bad guy” who lived in the bedroom closet. The invisible “Barnaby” was a large man with a black mustache who liked to scare people. Whenever she was asked to check the closet for Barnaby, she always told her son there was no sign of him, but the child continued to complain about Barnaby. During a plane trip to Denver, she announced that Barnaby would not be around anymore because he didn’t know where they were going, but the little boy informed her that Barnaby was following them on the next plane.  
Are these examples of imaginary companions? Maybe not. The descriptions of these particular cases suggest that the imagined creatures did not have much interaction with the children beyond scaring them. But sometimes frightening imagined characters serve other functions as well. According to the mother of a 4-year-old in Newson and Newson’s research, the child imagined monkeys who “live in the cellar, and that’s why we won’t go down the cellar, because they might get him; and if there’s something wrong, it’s always a monkey that’s come up from the cellar and done it.” Another child had a pet dragon who played with him, “but the dragon gets in the way sometimes when Alistair’s frightened. If he wants to go upstairs and it’s dark, he says ‘The dragon might get me if I go upstairs, won’t you, Dragon?’”  
Frances Wickes reports a case in which an ominous being appeared to help a child overcome her fear of the dark or the unknown. Typically, imaginary companions that help children overcome fears are the friendly, docile sort, such as a gentle tiger who can be bossed around by a child who is afraid of animals (this type of function is discussed in Chapter 4). However, in this case, an invisible menacing figure referred to as “it” helped the child conquer her fears.  
She deliberately let this figure go with her. She walked into the dark places where she believed it was and faced it. She let it walk with her on the street, she deliberately took it as her companion until she found that not only had it lost its terrifying power but that also her unreasoned fears of dark places and of being alone were dropping from her.  
My impression is that invisible entities who are primarily disliked or feared but who have other characteristics associated with imaginary companions (e.g., a relatively stable personality, are relatively rare. However, children sometimes express negative feelings about imaginary companions who, in most respects, are good friends. Mauro reported that 34 percent of the children with imaginary companions said they sometimes were angry with their friends, and many parents report having witnessed their children engaged in arguments with imaginary companions.  
We found that when we asked children if there was anything they did not like about their imaginary companions, they had plenty of complaints. “She puts yogurt in my hair.” “He hits me on the head.” “She won’t share.” Some imaginary companions don’t show up when the child wants them to, whereas others are annoying because they never go away. Pretend friends have been known to bite, throw tem-
per tantrums, and make their child creators do bad things, such as toss a sister’s beloved doll in the toilet. Sometimes they are overly free with negative comments and criticisms. For example, as a young boy, Ben Hogan had a pretend friend named Hennie Bogan who sat on his shoulder and made fun of the way he played golf. Perhaps Ben took Hennie’s criticisms to heart because he grew up to become one of the greatest golfers of this century, winning the Masters, the U.S. Open, and the British Open in 1953.

Sources of information about imaginary companions

Who are the best informants about imaginary characters, the parents or the children themselves? What about retrospective reports—the memories of adults for the imaginary characters they created as young children? Each source of information has drawbacks and advantages.

Interviews with parents

In general, parents are not particularly good sources of information about imaginary companions. There often are large discrepancies in the descriptions of imaginary companions given by parents and by their children. For example, one parent told us that her son had a playmate named Nobby, a little invisible boy. The child also mentioned Nobby when he was asked about pretend friends, but when we asked how often he played with Nobby, he scowled and replied, “I don’t play with him.” We learned that Nobby was a 160-year-old businessman who visited the child between business trips to Portland and Seattle, whenever the child wanted to “talk things over.” The boy’s mother was as surprised as we were.

More commonly, parents simply don’t know many details about the imaginary friend. Sometimes it’s because they are reluctant to ask their children about the imaginary companions. Parents often tell us that although they are comfortable with their children having pretend friends, they don’t want to actively encourage this type of play. They allow their children to “do their thing,” but they don’t ask about the pretend friends or participate in the pretense. Especially as they get older, children are quite sensitive to this sort of ambivalence. One 6-year-old told us all about her imaginary companion, but when we were leaving the interview room, she asked us not to repeat to her mother anything she had said. In fact, many parents are completely unaware that their children have imaginary companions. In our work with 6- and 7-year-olds, we found that parents were aware of only seven of 32 imaginary companions created after the age of 4. Even with younger children, many parents in our research learned about their children’s imaginary companions for the first time when the children participated in our study. (The effect of parents’ attitudes about imaginary companions on children’s play will be discussed more fully in Chapter 3.)

It is not necessarily the case that parents who do not know about their children’s imaginary companions are uninformed in their children’s lives or harbor negative feelings about imaginary companions. Sometimes pretend friends have commonplace names that the child mentions, in passing, along with the names of real children at the local day care or in the neighborhood. When my daughter was 3, she sometimes referred to a person named Michael Rose. Amber seemed to enjoy her time with Michael Rose, and I became curious about him. When I asked her preschool teachers to point him out to me, they had no idea whom I was talking about. I subsequently pressed my daughter for details and learned, among other things, that he had a barn full of giraffes. Somewhat belatedly, I figured out that Michael Rose lived only in her imagination.
A similar case involved a 3-year-old boy who created an imaginary companion when he started attending a play group. His mother was a little worried about how her son would adjust to the group because he was quite apprehensive about leaving her for an extended period. She was relieved to find him relaxed and happy when she picked him up after his first day. He explained that he had met a little girl named Margarine who was really nice to him. After hearing several references to the kindness of Margarine over the next few weeks, the mother decided to contact Margarine’s parents to convey how much she appreciated their daughter’s thoughtfulness and caring behavior toward her son. Clearly, Margarine had been a big factor in his easy transition to a group play experience. It turned out to be a challenge to locate Margarine or her parents. The play group leader and the boy’s mother searched the list of children in the play group, but couldn’t find any name with even a passing resemblance to “Margarine.” The mother asked her son to describe what the girl looked like, and learned that Margarine had long yellow braids that dragged behind her on the floor. It soon became apparent that Margarine was imaginary. Over time, Margarine evolved into a stable personality who remained with the family for several years, accompanying them on a move from the East Coast to the West Coast. When the boy’s little sister started going to preschool, Margarine was on hand to ease her transition as well. The brother drew the picture of Margarine on the left, and his little sister drew the one on the right.

I don’t want to be too negative about the usefulness of asking parents about their children’s imaginary companions. When parents are aware of these friends, they can sometimes provide information that a child might fail to mention, such as the events that were taking place in the child’s life when he or she first started playing with an imaginary friend. It is also reassuring when the child’s report is corroborated by the parents’. However when it comes to answering some kinds of questions about imaginary companions (e.g., how common are they?), parental reports have severe limitations. It is not surprising that estimates of the incidence of imaginary companions based on parental report are much lower than Singer and Singer’s estimate of 65 percent. For example, in a study by Martin Manosevitz and his colleagues at the University of Texas at Austin, 28 percent of the parents of 222 children ages 3 to 5 years reported that their children had an imaginary companion. It is quite likely that some parents in this study were unaware of the existence of their children’s pretend friends.

Figure 2. Drawings of Margarine, an invisible girl shared by brother (left drawing) and sister (right drawing).

Interviews with children

Children are the best source of information about imaginary companions, but this doesn’t mean that there are no problems interpreting what they have to say. Sometimes children are not completely sure what you mean when you ask if they have a pretend friend. They might say “yes,” and then describe a real friend instead of an imaginary one. Other children might mention a stuffed animal that actually spends most of its time in the toy box. An even more trickier problem is that some children make up imaginary companions in response to questions about them. A pretend friend? What a good idea! And they invent one on the spot. Once when we pointed out to a child that the imaginary companion he was describing was not the same one he had told us about the week before, he replied that if we asked him 20 times, he would have 20 different imaginary companions. No doubt this child was quite imaginative, but it would have been inaccurate to describe him as having an imaginary companion.
Some researchers have openly discussed such confabulation. In an early monograph, Arthur Jersild, Frances Markey, and Catherine Jersild of Columbia University found that some children made up responses to the research question: "Did you ever have an imaginary playmate, someone who seemed to be with you but who really was not a real person?" While some of descriptions elicited by this question were imaginary companions that seemed to be vivid and well-developed fantasy creations, many children described characters which were much less permanent and could be revised or changed entirely on any passing whim. "It became apparent that the children's replies could serve only as a record of the kinds of characters children most frequently entertain in their imagination rather than as an adequate appraisal of the peculiar phenomenon of imaginary companions." Thus, Jersild and his colleagues interpreted the children's answers to their questions as a record of the types of creatures children imagine rather than as an account of the characteristics of imagined entities that played an enduring role in the child's fantasy life.

Even when children clearly are describing an imaginary companion that they play with on a regular basis, inconsistencies in their descriptions suggest that they are making up details as they go along. When we first started interviewing children about imaginary companions, the discrepancies and spontaneously created details bothered us. We wondered if the information we were gathering was telling us anything meaningful about the children's fantasy lives. Now we view this aspect of children's reports as part of the phenomenon we are researching and something to be expected. After all, although the adult's goal is to find out about the imaginary companion, for the child, the interview might be just another opportunity to pretend. Probably every time children think about their imaginary companions, they invent new details. Some are transitory, some remain as part of the core representation of the imaginary companion. On occasion children may try out a whole new way of thinking about the imaginary companion. Jean Piaget, the famous Swiss psychologist, reported that his own daughter had an imaginary animal friend named Aseau who changed on a daily basis. Sometimes it was a dog, but it could also be an insect, a bird, or even a huge beast with nails on its feet. This is a particularly extreme example; more commonly, the core representation of the imaginary companion is relatively stable, and some details are variable.

What Are Imaginary Companions Like?

When we first interviewed the child who had Nutsy and Nutsy, we witnessed the dynamic character of imaginary companions in the fantasy lives of children. The mother had previously told us that there were two Nutsys, a male and a female. When we asked the child how many pretend friends she had, she said she had many and held up both hands to indicate 10.

EXP.: You have 10 Nutsys?
CHILD: Yes, lots of Nutsys!
EXP.: Are they boys or are they girls?
CHILD: One is a boy, and one is a girl.

Now she was back to the usual way she thought about her pretend friends which continued throughout the rest of the interview. These sorts of inconsistencies do not make the child's report any less interesting, and should not be taken as evidence that there is nothing substantive in what the child says about his or her fantasy life. However, in contrast to children who alter the details of an imaginary friend from one time to the next, some children completely change the description, or cannot remember anything about an imaginary companion they discussed a week earlier. For example, one child we interviewed described a wonderful giant penguin who tended to get into trouble for knocking over lampposts (his mother, who was watching the interview from behind a one-way mirror, was absolutely transfixed!). A week later, he said he didn't have an imaginary companion, and looked at us blankly when we asked him about the penguin. We suspect that the penguin made a cameo appearance in the child's fantasy life on the day that we brought up the topic of imaginary companions.

Adult memories of imaginary companions

Another way to find out about imaginary companions is to ask adults about their own childhoods. Adults often provide interesting and thoughtful accounts of their childhood imaginary companions. The insight gained from maturity allows them to speculate about why they created the imaginary companion, and they can often provide information about how long the fantasy friends lasted and why they disappeared. This account of two childhood imaginary companions,
Imaginary Companions and the Children Who Create Them

provided by a man in his 40s, exemplifies the rich detail that adults are sometimes able to report:

Sometime before my sixth birthday, possibly when I was 3 or 4, I began to have two imaginary companions. These two folks were named Digger and Dewy. They were with me for several years, and I remember them mostly as playmates, more specifically playing with me in the backyard, enough so that I would consider from this perspective of time and space, that they lived in the backyard. I don’t remember them ever coming into the house, though I don’t think it was forbidden or anything, it’s just that I mostly remember going into the backyard to find them, like you would go to the neighborhood playground to meet your friends.

Digger was my twin. He looked like me and spoke in pretty much the same voice. The major difference was that he was more serious. He was the leader, the person who initiated the games, designed the roads in the sandbox, tempted me to stay when my mother called me home. He was very smart and knew many answers to complex questions, like Why are there trees? Or where do you really come out if you dig straight down? I say he was my twin, but he was also bigger and stronger than me. We never fought. He was there to protect me from the unknowns of the woods. He was very brave and sometimes even daring. He looked out for the rest of us. He had a dog that wasn’t really a dog. The dog’s name was Dewy. Dewy was more than a mere dog. He was sort of a superdog. He was at least half human. He could talk and he liked to make jokes. He laughed a lot. Sometimes when Digger got too serious, Dewy and I would smile at each other and nod knowingly. Dewy walked mostly on his hind legs. He reminds me most closely of a cartoon character, maybe modeled after Goofy, only he wasn’t clumsy or stupid. Dewy was black with short hair, and he smelled like a dog only I don’t remember him having dog breath. Sometimes Dewy and I would rumble together, play tag, fall asleep next to each other in a thicket of red cedar. I was much more physical with Dewy than I ever was with Digger. Dewy and I loved each other freely and openly like a boy loves a dog. Digger and I were on more of an intellectual plane. Digger was the thinker and doer. Dewy liked to play for the sheer joy of playing. He laughed for the joy of laughing. On the other hand, you always got the feeling that Dewy would be there growling if there was ever any real danger. Together Dewy and Digger watched the woods for you, they made it safe to go up the hill into the Kaschel’s farm with the Big Rock and all the scary dairy cows.

I have found that the great variety in the descriptions collected from children is also present in the descriptions collected from adults. For example, one retrospective report described an imaginary companion created when our Iranian informant was 4 years old and growing up in Israel. His friend lived in the mirror, was always well dressed and professional looking, had a positive attitude about life, and liked to talk about business-related matters. He never slept because he was busy with work. Another adult remembered an invisible imaginary companion named Hermie who looked like a big fluffy cotton ball with facial features. Hermie appeared whenever the child hugged twice on her earlobe. Adults have also told us about The Green Gunkies (small green furry monsters who were funny, but tended to steal things from around the house), miniature bears, stone turtles, an invisible pigeon named Che-Che, and many other interesting imaginary friends.

The problem with retrospective reports is that many children forget about their imaginary companions once they no longer need them (see Chapter 6). Even a few months later, children sometimes claim not to remember the friends they used to enjoy so much. For this reason, it is likely that memories for a large number of imaginary companions do not survive into adulthood. As a consequence, estimates of the incidence of imaginary companions based on adult memories tend to be quite low. Charles Schaefer, a psychologist at Fordham University in New York, asked 800 high school students, "As a child, did you ever have any imaginary companions (e.g., friends, animals)?" (They did not specify if stuffed animals were to be included.) In this study, 18.25 percent of the students reported they had had an imaginary companion.

Another problem with retrospective reports is that the source of the memory is not clear. Many adults report that they don’t remember firsthand having had an imaginary companion, but their parents tell them they did and have the anecdotes to prove it. Thus, adult answers to questions about their childhood imaginary companions are sometimes based on family stories, rather than actual memories of interacting with a pretend friend.

Multiple sources and repeated interviews

Now that I have described some of the complexities in trying to come up with believable information about imaginary companions, I’ll describe the strategy that Stephanie Carlson and I used in a study with 152 3- and 4-year-olds. We interviewed the parents and the children twice, with the two interviews occurring about one week apart.
By having two sources of information and asking about imaginary companions on two occasions, we avoided some of the problems I have described above.

At the time of the first meeting we asked the child about imaginary companions in the following way:

Now I'm going to ask you some questions about friends. Some friends are real like the kids who live on your street, the ones you play with. And some friends are pretend friends. Pretend friends are ones that are make-believe, that you pretend are real. Do you have a pretend friend?

If the child answered "yes," he or she was asked a series of questions about the friend, including questions about its name, whether it was a toy or completely pretend, its gender, age, physical appearance, what the child liked and did not like about the friend, and where the friend lived and slept.

Here is the way we asked parents about imaginary companions at the time of the first interview:

An imaginary companion is a very vivid imaginary character (person, animal) with which a child interacts during his/her play and daily activities. Sometimes the companion is entirely invisible; sometimes the companion takes the form of a stuffed animal or doll. An example of an imaginary companion based on a stuffed animal is Hobbes in the popular comic strip "Calvin and Hobbes." Does your child have an imaginary companion?

A week later, both the children and the parents were interviewed again. This time we used information we had collected a week earlier to clarify the responses of both the parents and the children. When we talked to the children, we first asked if they had an imaginary companion in exactly the same way as before. We were interested in finding out if children would be consistent in their descriptions of imaginary companions mentioned at the first interview. Some children said they didn't have an imaginary companion, but their parents had provided descriptions of imaginary companions a week earlier. If the child again reported that he or she did not have an imaginary companion, we asked about the one described by the parent (e.g., "Who is Baintor?"). These follow-up questions in which the pretend friend was mentioned by name were uniformly successful in eliciting descriptions from the children. Maybe these children simply had not understood our original question.

The information from the parents gathered at the first interview also helped to clear up another source of confusion. Some children have their own idiosyncratic way of referring to an imaginary companion. At the time of the first interview, parents sometimes told us that their child used another term, such as "fake friend," "ghost sister," or "friends who live in my house." In these cases, we used the child's own term to ask about imaginary companions at the time of the second interview.

We also used the information provided by the child in our second interview with the parent. If the child had named an imaginary companion that was not mentioned by the parent, we asked the parent if the description corresponded to any real friend or if they had any idea who the child was talking about. If the child had mentioned a stuffed animal or doll at the first interview, the parent was asked a series of questions about the extent of the child's interaction and play with the named toy.

On the basis of all the information collected from the parents and the children, children were categorized as having an imaginary companion if:

(1) the child provided a description of an imaginary companion at Session 1, named the same imaginary companion at Session 2, and the parent said the description did not correspond to a real friend or (in the case of stuffed animal) the parent said the child played with the toy a lot and treated it as if it were real (the parent did not have to independently identify the imaginary companion).

(2) the child said "yes" at Session 1 or Session 2 and named an imaginary companion described independently by the parent, or

(3) the child described different imaginary companions at the two sessions and the parent said the child had lots of imaginary companions (the parent might describe a third).

The child was categorized as not having an imaginary companion if:

(1) the child said "no" at both sessions, even if the parent said "yes."

(2) the parent said the child did not play much with a stuffed animal named as an imaginary companion by the child, or

(3) The child said "yes," but could not give any details (e.g., a name) for the imaginary companion.
Twenty-eight percent of the 152 children (42 children) met our criteria for having an imaginary companion. (The parents of an additional 19 children reported that their children had imaginary companions, but these children did not name the imaginary companions independently, and when asked about the imaginary companion named by the parent, they did not provide any information.) Twenty of the imaginary companions were invisible, and 22 were based on toys. The descriptions were tremendously varied. One child created pretend versions of her real friends, so that she could continue to play with them when they were not around (e.g., she had Rachel, her real friend, and "Fake Rachel," her pretend friend). Similarly, another child played regularly with MacKenzie, an imaginary companion based on her real cousin MacKenzie, who lived in another state. Here are some other examples of imaginary companions:

- Derek—a 91-year-old man who is only 2 feet tall but can "hit bears"
- Bobo—a monkey who plays hide-and-seek and sometimes messes up the bed
- Station Pheta—a boy with "big beady eyes and a big blue head"; his job is to hunt for sea anemones and dinosaurs at the beach
- The Girl—a 4-year-old girl who is "a beautiful person" and "wears pink all the time"
- Joshua—a possum who lives in San Francisco
- Bainior—an invisible boy who "lives in the light"; you can’t see him because he is white
- Hekka—a 3-year-old invisible boy who is very small but "talks so much" and is "mean" sometimes

The table on the opposite page shows the number of boys and girls who created imaginary companions. In addition, this table shows that many of the children impersonated imaginary characters. We asked the children about impersonation in the following way:

- Do you ever pretend to be an animal? (What animal do you pretend to be?)
- Do you ever pretend to be a different person? (What person do you pretend to be?)
- Have you ever pretended to be anything else like a machine, airplane, or something like that? (What sort of thing did you pretend to be?)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>IC only</th>
<th>Impersonation only</th>
<th>Both IC and impersonation</th>
<th>Neither IC nor impersonation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Girls</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>n=77</td>
<td>(27%)</td>
<td>(5%)</td>
<td>(8%)</td>
<td>(60%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Boys</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>47</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>n=75</td>
<td>(12%)</td>
<td>(17%)</td>
<td>(8%)</td>
<td>(63%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td>30</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>93</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>n=152</td>
<td>(20%)</td>
<td>(11%)</td>
<td>(8%)</td>
<td>(61%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Almost all the children reported that they sometimes pretended to be a person or an animal. Some of the imagined characters that were impersonated were quite unique (e.g., Mr. Electricity, Flashman of the World). Others were more mundane (e.g., cats, tigers, woodpeckers). Some children also pretended to be a machine (e.g., a vacuum cleaner), but this was much less common. To identify children who impersonated an imagined character on a regular basis, we had to rely on their parents' reports. Parents were asked the same questions as the children and, in addition, were asked:

- How often did your child pretend to be this animal (person, object)—only once or twice, occasionally, frequently, or every day?
- At what age and for what period of time?

The parents frequently reported this type of play, but for some children it seemed particularly important. Children were categorized as impersonators if the parent reported that their child pretended to be an animal or person every day for a period of at least one month. Nineteen percent of the 152 children (29 children) were categorized as impersonators. Twelve of these children also had imaginary companions. The 17 impersonators who did not have imaginary companions included four children whose parents reported a previous imaginary companion that was not mentioned by the child (e.g., one parent reported that her son had created an imaginary pet rat that went everywhere with him for several months). The table shows the
number of boys and girls who were categorized as impersonators and the extent that this category overlapped with having an imaginary companion.

Our estimate that 28 percent of preschool children create imaginary companions may be a little low, reflecting our conservative approach to identifying children who had imaginary companions. Perhaps we should have included children who did not corroborate their parents' descriptions of imaginary companions. Some of these children may not have wanted to share their private fantasies with us, or may have forgotten about an imaginary companion, even though at one time it was important to them. It is also possible that some of the toys that were rejected as imaginary companions on the basis of the parent interview played a more significant role in the children's fantasy lives than the parents realized.

Despite these caveats, we think that 28 percent is a reasonable estimate for the incidence of imaginary companions for children up to 4 years of age. I used to think this number was a more global estimate of how common pretend friends are because 4 is the age that is usually mentioned as the peak time for imaginary companion production. However, I learned differently when Lynn Gerow, Carolyn Charlie, and I interviewed 100 of these same children when they were 6 and 7 years old. This group included 69 children who did not have an imaginary companion as preschoolers. A large number of these children (32 of the 69, or 46 percent) had created an imaginary companion after 4 years of age. The majority of these later-developing imaginary friends were invisible (81 percent). They included ordinary types of invisible boys and girls, along with a variety of interesting and exotic individuals. One girl described a blue-skinned friend named Simpy. Our first cases of an imaginary companion with a pierced ear, an invisible snowman, an invisible elephant, and an invisible squirrel were in this group.

If we consider all cases of imaginary companions created up to the age of 7, 63 percent of the children in our study had them. If we include only the invisible friends, 43 percent of the children had them. Any way you look at it, lots of children have imaginary companions. It is an elaborate type of imaginative activity that is surprisingly common. What are they like? What stands out most to me is how extremely varied they are. I have been talking to children, parents, and other adults about imaginary companions for several years now, and I am always hearing about new and different kinds. When it comes to imaginary companions, variability is the name of the game. Now that we have discussed what counts as an imaginary companion and how to figure out who has one, let's turn our attention to the children themselves. Who are these big-time pretenders?
The Characteristics of Children Who Create Imaginary Companions

From the wilderness of my heart I cannot exclude the question whether railway-engineers, if they had been brought up on more fantasy, might not have done better with all their abundant means than they commonly do.

— J.R.R. Tolkien

Not all children create imaginary companions. What can be said about the children who do? Is there any truth to the idea that these children are especially bright and creative, but perhaps too shy or socially awkward to develop friendships with real children? What about the Hollywood portrayal of such children as emotionally damaged or lacking a firm grasp of reality? The purpose of this chapter is to describe what the most recent research has revealed about children with imaginary companions. Along the way, I will point out why overly negative stereotypes of these children have been generated and perpetuated.

Personality and behavior

One of the earliest papers published on imaginary companions described the children who created them as tending to have a "nervous temperament." Other researchers have generated much longer lists of the shortcomings and problems believed to characterize children with imaginary companions. For example, Margaret Svendsen reported that 35 of 40 children with imaginary companions (ages 3 to 16 years) were described by their parents as having some type of personality problem, including "timidity in the presence of other children; a domineering manner with other children, fear in physical activity, sensitivity; an undemonstrative manner and reserved demeanor; evasiveness and irresponsibility; eagerness for being in the limelight and fear of being outdone, and evidence of dissatisfaction with the role of his sex."2

In another commonly cited (but dated) study, Ames and Learned assert, partly on the basis of parent interviews, that all children with imaginary companions must have some personality defect, with the type of imaginary companion indicative of the particular problem. They were especially negative about the children whose imaginary friends were animals:

It appears to be characteristic of children who have imaginary animals as playmates that they are children who have adjustment difficulties, particularly difficulties in social, i.e., interpersonal, adjustments. The animals seem to some extent to take the place of unsatisfactory or unacquired human friends. The following phrases descriptive of personality occur in the records of their cases: "gets along badly with children"; "very fearful of new people"; "dependent on mother and aversion to children, slow to adjust to a group and plays quietly by herself"; "dictatorial, plays poorly with contemporaries"; "moody, negative, explosive, slightly dependent"; "a very dependent child, a lone wolf in school"; "negative, strong tendency to react by opposites, slow to adjust to new people."3

From all this, one might conclude that children with imaginary companions have a lot of problems. But there is a fundamental flaw in these early studies. What they share, in addition to negative views on the personalities and behaviors of children with imaginary companions, is a failure to compare the characteristics of these children with those of children who do not have imaginary companions. How many of these personality characteristics and behavior problems might have been generated by the parents of children who did not have imaginary companions? This is a crucial piece of missing information because we are not interested in whether children with imaginary companions have problems, but whether those problems are actually more common among children with imaginary companions than children without imaginary companions. Any group of parents—those of musical children, of red-headed children, of children who live in Nova Scotia, as well as the parents of children with imag-
inary companions—would be able to generate a list of less-than-desirable attributes of their offspring. However, such lists provide no information about whether these problems are uniquely associated with being musical, having red hair, living in Nova Scotia, or having an imaginary companion. The lack of an appropriate comparison or control group makes a list of problems generated by any single group of parents impossible to interpret.

One might argue that although it would be nice to have a control group, the negativity in these descriptions of children with imaginary companions is striking, and unlikely to be neutralized when compared with descriptions of other children. But many early studies have a second problem that helps to explain why these children sound out of the ordinary. Researchers tended to recruit for their studies children who were particularly likely to have emotional or behavioral problems. For example, about half of the children in the Ames and Learned study were enrolled in a guidance nursery at the Yale Clinic of Child Development, and the other half were recruited from the private practice of a mental health professional. In another well-known study conducted in the 1940s, the children were patients on the Children’s Ward of Bellevue Psychiatric Hospital.

What happens when a nonclinical random sample of children is studied (instead of the outpatients of a clinic or some other biased group) and when children who have imaginary companions are compared with children who do not have fantasy friends? A much more positive picture emerges. For example, no significant differences between the two groups of children are detected in the incidence of a wide range of behavior problems (e.g., restlessness, masturbation, jealousy, thumb sucking, fearfulness, attention seeking, hair pulling, etc.), and some positive behaviors are more common among children with imaginary companions (e.g., more cooperative with adults, less aggressive play).

Perhaps the most comprehensive study comparing the personalities of children with and without imaginary companions was conducted by Jennifer Mauro. In her research, children with imaginary companions were interviewed three times over a period of three years, beginning when the children were about 4 years of age. Their responses were compared with those of a group similar in age, gender, and socioeconomic background who did not have imaginary companions.

Mauro assessed temperament by asking the parents to fill out the

Child Behavior Checklist, a questionnaire about children’s reactions to common childhood situations. The checklist includes assessments of 15 aspects of temperament that vary among young children and are related to personality characteristics in adults. On 13 of the 15, children with and without imaginary companions did not differ. The two groups were markedly similar in most respects. Interesting differences emerged, however, between the two groups of children in shyness and attentional focusing. Each of these differences will be discussed in turn.

**Shyness**

Thirteen questions on the Child Behavior Checklist concern shyness. Parents were asked to indicate on a scale from 1 to 7 whether statements such as the following were true of their children: “sometimes prefers to watch rather than join other children playing,” “gets embarrassed when strangers pay a lot of attention to her/him.” The parents of 4-year-olds, children with imaginary companions rated their children as less shy than the parents of children who did not have imaginary companions, debunking the myth that children who create imaginary companions are too shy to make real friends.

Other studies have yielded similar findings. Jerome Singer and Dorothy Singer observed 111 children playing at day care over the course of a year and found that children who were identified as having imaginary companions were less fearful and anxious in their play with other children. They were also described as smiling and laughing more than children without imaginary companions. In another study, college students who remembered having imaginary companions in childhood were found to be less neurotic, less introverted, more dominant in face-to-face situations, more self-confident, and more sociable than college students who did not remember any childhood pretend friends.

Differences in shyness do not show up in every study. At the University of Texas in Austin, Martin Manosevitz and his colleagues found that preschool children with imaginary companions were rated as being more adept at talking and interacting with adults, but there were no differences between the two groups in the extent that parents described the children as shy and reserved as opposed to open and outgoing. In addition, when the children in Mauro’s research were retested at age 5, the difference between the two groups
was less pronounced and failed to reach significance. By 7 years of age, the difference in shyness between the two groups of children had disappeared. Given that children with imaginary companions are not observed to be less shy than other children in every study and that the result does not hold up after the preschool years, it is best to think of this finding as intriguing but preliminary and in need of replication. In any case, it is not true that children with imaginary companions are typically more shy or introverted than other children.

**Attentional focusing**

Mauro also found a difference between children with and without imaginary companions in attentional focusing. Children were considered to be high on attentional focusing if their parents agreed with such statements as the following: "when picking up toys, usually keeps at the task until it's done," "sometimes becomes absorbed in a picture book and looks at it for a long time." In addition, the attentional focusing score was high if parents identified such statements as the following as not true of their child: "has a hard time concentrating on an activity when there are distracting noises," "often shifts rapidly from one activity to another.

Overall, the degree of focus detected in children with imaginary companions by their parents was greater than that detected in children without imaginary companions. As in the case of shyness, the differences between children with and without imaginary companions in attentional focusing decreased with age. When the children were tested at age 7, there was no longer a difference between the two groups.

In research related to attentional focusing, J. Singer assessed children's ability to wait quietly in the context of a game. He was interested in the possibility that imaginative children, who presumably have a rich inner life, would be able to sit quietly doing nothing for longer periods of time than other children. Although being imaginative is not the same as having an imaginary companion, the two are closely related in the context of this research. In fact, the question "Do you have a make-believe friend?" was one of four questions designed to identify children as high in imaginative predisposition.

In one of these studies, children between the ages of 6 and 9 were asked to pretend to be spacemen by sitting quietly in a "space capsule" for as long as possible. As predicted, the children who had been categorized as high in imaginative predisposition were able to sit quietly for longer than the other children. Singer and Singer concluded, "The predisposition of fantasy play as a personality trait may play an important part in children's capacity to tolerate delay or wait quietly in situations in which external stimulation is minimal... Imaginative play may be an important asset in the socialization process, which eventually helps children to develop the capacity for deferring immediate satisfaction that is part of growing up."14

It should be noted that not every study has found a difference in waiting ability between children with and without imaginary companions. Manosevitz and his colleagues assessed waiting ability by seating children (average age was 5 years, 9 months) on the floor surrounded by heavy cardboard. The child was instructed to be a "good driver, you have to sit real still, watch the road, and not talk or turn around." The researcher said, "Go," and then recorded the number of seconds children remained seated without moving or speaking. Although children with imaginary companions were able to sit still a little longer than children without imaginary companions (215.4 seconds compared with 171.3 seconds), this difference was not statistically significant.16

In summary, comparisons of children with and without imaginary companions suggest that children who have pretend-friends are better able to focus their attention than other children, but as was found for shyness, the difference between the two groups of children is not found in every study. These results, combined with Mauro's finding that the two groups of children were rated as equivalent on 13 out of 15 aspects of temperament, indicate that, overall, the personality similarities between children with and without imaginary companions are far more striking than their differences.

**Intelligence**

Although in the past the personalities of children with imaginary companions have been maligned, their intellects have been seen in a more positive light. Early researchers linked the creation of an imaginary companion with superior intelligence, and several studies have shown that children with imaginary companions tend to score above average on IQ tests. In addition, when children with imaginary
companions are compared with children who do not have imaginary companions, some studies have reported small but significant differences in intelligence. Despite these results, the evidence for an association between imaginary companions and superior intelligence is not compelling. Although many of the older studies report higher levels of intelligence for children with imaginary companions, not all of them do, and one of the most carefully conducted recent studies shows no difference in intelligence.

Why are the research results so inconsistent? Probably the answer has to do with variability in the assessment of intelligence, in the socioeconomic backgrounds of the children who participated in the studies, as well as in the criteria used to categorize children as having imaginary companions. Intelligence has many facets, only some of which might be related to the ability to create an imaginary friend. For example, there is some evidence that the link between having an imaginary companion and doing well on intelligence tests might be limited to tests of verbal abilities. Mauro found that children with imaginary companions scored significantly higher on the vocabulary subtest of the WISC-R, a comprehensive test of intelligence designed for use with young children, but there was no difference in scores on the block design subtest, which assesses spatial abilities. Stephanie Carlson and I found a similar difference in verbal intelligence between children with and without imaginary companions, as assessed by the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test, a widely used test of verbal intelligence in which the child’s task is to point to the picture considered to illustrate best the meaning of a word presented orally by the experimenter. However, the studies which report differences in verbal intelligence tend to include children from a range of socioeconomic backgrounds. When predominantly upper-middle-class children are tested, no differences between children with and without imaginary companions are found in verbal intelligence.

In summary, despite some results suggesting that children with imaginary companions might be superior in intelligence, it is not true that all intelligent children create imaginary companions nor that only highly intelligent children create them. Not all studies show a difference between children with and without imaginary companions, and when a difference is found, it tends to be small and pertinent only to verbal intelligence. It probably takes some degree of intelligence to create an imaginary friend—we have found that children who are well below average in intelligence are unlikely to have one. But many children of average intelligence invent pretend friends, and the absence of an imaginary companion says nothing about the child’s intellectual abilities.

Creativity

Children can be extremely creative, and nowhere is this more apparent than in their invention of pretend beings endowed with curious names, odd details, and strange characteristics. The capacity of children to entertain themselves for long stretches of time by interacting with pretend friends reflects an impressive imagination. Whether such children are more creative than those who do not have imaginary companions is unclear. Although some research suggests a small difference in creativity, this difference has been extremely difficult to document.

A major problem is the challenge of devising methods for measuring creativity in young children. One commonly used test is to ask children to state all the ways they can think of to use a common object (e.g., a cup, knife, newspaper, coat hanger) and then to score their responses for number and uniqueness (the Uses test). Another way of assessing creativity is to show children a series of abstract patterns and ask them to report what they see in the patterns (the Abstract Patterns task). Children’s responses are scored for quality, originality, and fluency. On these tests, children with and without imaginary companions score about the same. Other tasks in which children respond to a series of pictures (Torrance’s Thinking Creatively with Pictures, Penguin Picture Stories) also show no differences in creativity between children with and without imaginary companions.

On the other hand, children with a proclivity for fantasy (categorized partly on the basis of whether they had an imaginary companion) tell more novel stories in responses to a set of verbal stimuli than children who are less interested in fantasy play, and children who have imaginary companions, particularly boys, are described as more imaginative in their free play than other children. Charles Schaefer compared 400 adolescents who were categorized as creative on the basis of teacher evaluations and performance on two tests of creative thinking with 400 adolescents who were categorized as less creative. The majority of the adolescents who reported having
had an imaginary companion (90 out of 146) were in the creative group. 27

Perhaps the strongest evidence for differences in creativity is from Mauro's longitudinal study. When the children were 7 years old, she asked them to make a picture using a set of 48 geometric shapes and to describe it to her (the Gross Geometric Forms Test). The forms made by the children with imaginary companions were more recognizable to the experimenter, were given more appropriate names by the children, and were more likely to imply some action than the forms created by the other children. In addition, children who had imaginary companions were better able to describe the forms they had designed to the experimenter.

When differences in creativity are found, they favor children with imaginary companions, but overall, the differences in creativity, as measured on standard tests, are not overwhelming. Probably we do not find strong and consistent differences because, quite apart from the measurement problems, having an imaginary companion is only one of many ways to express creativity. I am always impressed with the imaginations of children who invent pretend friends, but not all highly creative children engage in this type of play. Certainly, parents should not interpret the absence of an imaginary companion as a negative reflection of their child's creative potential.

Family structure

Although children from families of every size create imaginary companions, firstborn and only children are somewhat more likely to do so.28 In a questionnaire study with parents, children who were identified as having imaginary companions included significantly more firstborns (40 percent) than children who did not have imaginary companions (23 percent).29 Although the difference in the percentages of only children in the two groups of children was not statistically significant in this study (33 percent vs. 26 percent), other samples of children with imaginary companions have tended to include many only children.30 In fact, the majority of the children with imaginary companions studied by Svendsen had no siblings. There is mixed evidence regarding the extent that imaginary companions are associated with other types of family structures—the biological parents being divorced, separated, or deceased. In several studies, the breakup of a nuclear family has not been reliably associated with the creation of a pretend friend. However, the Yawkeys at Pennsylvania State University found that children in single-parent families showed more evidence of having active imaginations, including a greater number of imaginary companions.31

Many parents report that they first noticed the imaginary companion shortly after the birth of the second child in the family, a timing which suggests that the imaginary companion might have been created to help the child cope with the reduced access to parents or the general upheaval that accompanies a new birth (see Chapter 4). In addition, the finding that firstborn and only children are more likely to have imaginary companions suggests that children might turn to this kind of pretense when other play partners are not readily available. This also might be true for families in which children are spaced by several years. I know of one family in which the firstborn child is nine years older than the second child, who is four years older than the third child. All three children created a pair of invisible imaginary companions: The oldest child had Ratter and Tatter, the middle child had Mousey and Squirrel, and the youngest child had Sheagle and Beagle.

Overall, there does seem to be some relation between the number and spacing of children in a family and the inclination to create imaginary companions. However, it is not solely children who are firstborn or who have no siblings who create imaginary companions, and the appearance of an imaginary companion in the lives of these children is not necessarily a sign of loneliness or psychological distress. It is quite possible that children who do not have siblings close to their own age are simply more likely to have the kind of unstructured time alone that promotes this type of play.

Television viewing

Children with imaginary companions watch significantly less television than children without imaginary companions. That was the finding of a study by Singer and Singer, who asked parents to keep a log of the television their children watched over the course of a year.32 The same finding was replicated in our own recent study, in which parents estimated the number of hours a day their children watched television.33

The relation between having an imaginary companion and watching less television is not surprising for a couple of reasons. When
children talk about why they watch television, it becomes clear that television serves some of the same functions as imaginary companions—both are fun and provide company. A child who is bored or lonely can turn on the television set. Another solution would be to create a pretend friend. In addition, some of the impulses toward imaginative play might be displaced by television watching, which substitutes an externally generated fantasy world for one of the child’s own invention.

It is also possible that children who watch a lot of television simply do not have time for imaginative play. According to Singer and Singer, watching television is not a bad thing in and of itself, but it does take away time from other kinds of activities. In order to develop imaginative kinds of play, children need unstructured time, but too often children with nothing to do are tempted to turn on the television. For some children this turns into a regular habit of watching television for several hours a day—hours that could be spent reading, playing outdoors, or in imaginative play. In fact, the average preschooler watches about 21 hours of television a week. Although watching television can be an enjoyable way to pass the time, parents should remember that children who complain of having nothing to do eventually develop ways of entertaining themselves.

Theory of mind

During the preschool years, children acquire a considerable body of knowledge about their own mental life and that of others. For example, they become aware of mental states such as belief and desire, and begin to use their understanding of these mental states to explain and predict behavior. This type of knowledge is so fundamental to social understanding it has become a major area of developmental research known as children’s developing “theory of mind”.

Developmental change in the child’s theory of mind has been documented in a variety of ways, but the first important demonstrations were conducted by Heinz Wimmer, Josef Perner, and their colleagues in Salzburg, Austria. In a “false belief” task which is now used in child development laboratories around the world, children are shown a box (e.g., a Band-Aid box) that typically contains objects familiar to young children. When the child opens the box, he or she discovers that it does not have the expected contents. For example, there might be crayons in the box. Then children are asked questions about what a person who saw the box, but not its contents, would think was inside and what the children themselves thought was in the box before they looked inside. Most 3- and many 4-year-olds make a striking kind of error when they answer these questions. They seem to have difficulty appreciating that it is possible to have a belief that does not correspond to the true state of the world, that is, a belief that is false. For example, once they learn that a Band-Aid box contains crayons, they predict that another person will think there are crayons in the box even before the person looks inside. They also report that they, themselves, originally thought the box contained crayons. (See the dialogue below for an example involving the discovery of pencils in a Smarties box, a candy familiar to Canadian and British children.) In contrast, older preschoolers have no difficulty realizing that they earlier had a false belief about the contents of the box, as would another person who had not had the opportunity to look inside the box.

Although the false belief task is the most common measure of theory of mind development, young children make other kinds of related

| Interaction between researcher administering a false belief task and a child participant |
|----------------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| Researcher: Look, here’s a box.       | Child: Smarties!                  |
| Researcher: Let’s open it and look inside. | Child: Oh... holy moly... pencils! |
| Researcher: Now I’m going to put them back and close it up again. (Does so) Now... when you first saw the box, before we opened it, what did you think was inside it? | Child: Pencils. |
| Researcher: Nicky (child’s friend) hasn’t seen the box, what will he think is inside it? | Child: Pencils. |

behavior, and to appreciate that another person might interpret an object or event differently from themselves all develop during the preschool years and are interpreted as markers of children's developing "theory of mind." Does having an imaginary companion or engaging in other types of elaborate pretense promote the development of these insights? After all, imaginary companions frequently take part in family life—joining the family at the dinner table, the children at bath time and story time, and going along on family excursions. On these occasions, the child is the official commentator on the imaginary companion's activities and the translator of what it has to say. Perhaps there are cognitive consequences of becoming practiced in negotiating interactions between imaginary companions and real people. Once the distinction between internal mental representations of external stimuli and the stimuli themselves is mastered in pretend play, children might be better equipped to think about similar distinctions in other situations or contexts. In other words, they might have an advanced understanding of mental life.

Stephanie Carlson and I tested this hypothesis by giving children with and without imaginary companions a series of the tasks described above (e.g., the appearance/reality, false belief, and restricted view tasks), which all require the insight that mental representations may not constitute an accurate reflection of the external world. 39 We found that children who had imaginary companions did better on the theory of mind tasks than the other children. They were more likely to report that the fake rock looked like a rock although it was a sponge, to predict that another person would mistakenly think Band-Aids were in the Band-Aid box and that they themselves had originally thought the box contained Band-Aids, and that another person would not know an elephant was in a picture when only a small, nondescript part of the trunk was showing. 40

The knowledge that mental representations are distinct from the objects and events that they represent is an insight which is fundamental to our understanding of other people. People act on the basis of how they believe the world to be (i.e., their subjective understanding), not on the actual state of the world (i.e., the objective reality). The possibility of a mismatch between what a person thinks to be the case and what actually is the case must be taken into account when we try to predict or explain the behavior of other people. Children with imaginary companions seem to be better able to imagine the perspective of another person in theory of mind tasks. This re-
sult complements other research showing that engaging in pretend play helps children make distinctions that can be applied more generally in understanding other people.41

Gender

One of the most frequently made claims about the differences between children with and without imaginary companions concerns their gender. In many studies, girls are reported to be more likely to create imaginary companions than boys.42 Why do we find this gender difference? Is it because girls play with dolls, which are apt to be included as imaginary companions? Are boys less interested in imaginative play or more reluctant to reveal their fantasies to an experimenter?43

None of these possibilities accounts for the gender difference. Girls' fondness for dolls explains nothing: Studies with varying definitions (e.g., including or excluding stuffed animals and dolls) have found gender differences. In fact, boys seem to have as many imaginary companions based on toys as girls do.44 It is also not the case that preschool boys are less involved in fantasy play than their female counterparts, or less likely to tell a researcher about their pretend play. We found that preschool boys and girls reported imaginary characters equally often. The gender difference may be partly due to how the children play with the character. Girls tend to create an imaginary character that functions as a companion; whereas many preschool boys impersonate imaginary characters instead of treating them as separate entities. For example, instead of pretending that Batman is a friend, a preschool boy might be likely to pretend that he is Batman.

One might ask if impersonating an imagined character is fundamentally different from having an imaginary companion. As I said in Chapter 2, I do not equate the two types of play, but consider them to be closely related. In our study, we collected information about both kinds of play and thus were able to compare children who had imaginary companions with children who impersonated and with a control group of children who engaged in neither type of pretend play. We found that children who had imaginary companions and children who impersonated imaginary characters were very similar in ways that distinguished both groups from the other children. For example, both impersonators and children with imaginary companions did well on theory of mind tasks, many of which involved taking the perspective of another person. Their theory of mind scores did not differ from each other, but both groups scored significantly higher than children in the control group. In addition, both groups of children scored significantly higher than children in the control group on a task used to assess the developmental level of the child's pretend play.45

In addition to the tendency of boys to impersonate imaginary characters, boys might be under-represented in groups of preschoolers identified as having imaginary companions because the boys haven't created them yet. While it is true that many more preschool girls than boys have imaginary companions, we found that the gender difference narrowed when we followed children up to the age of 7. Of the 32 children we interviewed who created imaginary companions between ages 4 and 7, over half were boys. And when adults are asked about the imaginary companions they had as children, men report having created an imaginary companion at older ages than women.46

In summary, the commonly stated claim that more girls than boys have imaginary companions is somewhat misleading. Gender differences in this type of play exist, but they might be partly due to the timetable for creating imaginary companions, with boys tending to create imaginary companions at older ages than girls. In addition, although both preschool boys and girls create imaginary characters, many of the boys impersonate the character, instead of imagining it as a companion. Reasons for a gender difference in how preschool children interact with an imaginary character will be discussed further in Chapter 4.

Attitudes of parents

Not surprisingly, there are substantial differences in adult reaction to and interpretation of childhood fantasy activities in general, and imaginary companions in particular. Some adults view imaginary companions in an extremely positive light and may even attempt to introduce the idea of an imaginary person to children who don't already have one. For example, Dr. Spock advises that children without a father might benefit from creating an imaginary one. Similarly, in an article in Sesame Street Magazine, parents are provided suggestions for introducing invisible guests into the child's pretend play.
imaginary companion in the child's head, but once they discover their child has one, they support the fantasy in a variety of ways. One of the children in our study began to express her interest in dolphins as soon as she was old enough to talk and created the first of several imaginary dolphin friends at about age 3. When I visited this child's home, the large collection of dolphin toys and dolphin pictures on the walls of her bedroom were obvious evidence of her parent's supportive attitude. At the time of this visit, the mother was wearing a dolphin T-shirt, which she had put on to please her daughter.

Sometimes the child involves family members in her game of pretense. A colleague of mine has a daughter who as a 3-year-old enjoyed fantasy games of impersonation that required the cooperation of the entire family. On her request, everyone shifted to alter identities on Wednesdays. The girl became a boy named Rainbow Cutter, the younger brother became a girl named Rainbow Cut, the mother became a little girl named Sweet Flower, and the father (who got the raw end of things, I think) became a piece of string named Hagar. The child's music lessons were also on Wednesdays, which was a little embarrassing for the mother, who didn't want other parents to think that she had named her child Rainbow Cutter (even the music teacher called her by this name), or that the little girl had only one outfit of clothing (the dress and vest she insisted on wearing whenever she assumed the identity of Rainbow Cutter).46

In another family, a 3-year-old insisted upon being known both at home and at school as Rabbit. For almost a year he routinely wore a sock pinned to the back of his pants to serve as a tail. His mother told me that when she attended events at her son's preschool, she wore a name tag that said "Rabbit's Mother" at his request. Parents often are drawn into the fantasy in some sort of way. One mother whose son had an imaginary dog described her involvement with the pretense: "He has Candy, a dog. When I go for a walk with my dog, we take Candy; we have to take Candy to the edge of the pavement. I think he can really see this dog. In fact, I said to my husband, I think I can see this dog!"47

The parents in these families and many others like them go along with such games because they value imagination and hope to cultivate it in their children. And there is no question that parental support and encouragement promote children's engagement in fantasy. After decades of studying the development of imagination, Singer and Singer place the support of fantasy behavior by a key person in the child's life at the top of their list of common threads in early childhood that are linked to the development of fantasy. They base this conclusion on the results of their own empirical studies, as well as their extensive review of childhood memories reported in biographies of creative adults. These sources provide extensive evidence that adults can promote imagination in their children by treating children's inventions with delight and respect, and by providing children with time, a place, and simple props to stimulate their pretend play.50

However, not all parents are supportive of fantasy play. First of all, there are substantial cultural differences in the extent that play is viewed as a valuable activity. For example, when JoAnn Farver and Carolee Howes of UCLA compared the responses of 30 mothers in a community in northern California with those of 30 mothers in a small town in southern Mexico, they found that the American mothers believed play to be important for the educational benefits it provided their children, whereas the Mexican mothers considered play to be of no value in their children's development.51 More research is...
needed to document these types of cultural differences and investigate their implications.

There is also considerable variation within American culture in attitudes about play. More specifically, I have encountered a variety of reactions to imaginary companions, including many negative ones, in the literature and in my own research with American children. Sometimes parents simply object to the nuisance factor of having an invisible entity in the household who must not be sat upon and requires its own space at an already crowded dinner table. Other parents have more substantive concerns about imaginary companions. They worry that pretend friends reflect some underlying confusion about fantasy and reality, that talking about a pretend friend is equivalent to lying, or that this type of play is actually a more serious activity involving communication with spiritual beings. What impact do these negative attitudes have on children's fantasy behavior? Do children create pretend friends even when their parents actively discourage it?

First let's consider the case of children whose parents worry that an imaginary companion is indicative of fantasy/reality confusion or psychological disturbance of some kind. In Newson and Newson's British sample, many working-class parents in particular believed that "there might be something disturbing about the mental health of a child who seems to this extent out of touch with reality." These parents, the Newsons wrote, "distrust an imagination which, they believe, might later lead the child into plain dishonesty; or... regard the child's stories as already constituting a threat to their control of his behavior." Here are some examples of parents expressing such concerns:

He's got a... I'll tell you what it is—it worries me sometimes—he's got a vivid imagination; and it goes on and on until he lives it; and sometimes, these imaginary people, you have to feed them with him, do you see what I mean? It worries me.

Well, yes, I've often been worried about that. He—you know if he's on his own, he starts these imagining games; and he'll start talking to himself, and then being the other guy you know, talking back, and I worried a bit about it; till, you know, I sort of thought... listened to him one day, and he says, "That was a good game of mine, wasn't it, Mom?" And I thought, well all right, he realizes it is a game, and I might as well let him go on.

Often this concern is related to the parents' beliefs about the types of behavior that are appropriate for particular ages. Even parents who have some admiration for the creativity involved in a preschooler's invention of a pretend friend might express concern when the child is still playing with the imaginary companion beyond the preschool years. In Chapter 6, I will discuss the evidence that children become more and more secretive about their imaginary companions as they sense their parents' disapproval. In any case, Newson and Newson's work provides a number of examples of children who have imaginary companions despite the disapproval of their parents.

Child educators, as well as parents, have sometimes voiced concerns about the effects of children's involvement in fantasy. Maria Montessori, the first woman to receive a medical degree in Italy, espoused a view of early childhood education in which children were to be provided with materials that would help them discover real-world variations in shapes, sounds, and textures as a preparation for the learning of reading, writing, and mathematics. Although Montessori made important contributions to early childhood education and many of her ideas continue to be influential today, one of the major criticisms of her approach is the total focus on intellectual exercises and exclusion of imaginative play. "In the strictly utilitarian atmosphere of the Montessori classroom, there are none of the usual toy animals, dolls, trucks or dress-up costumes. Children in 'pure' Montessori schools are virtually restricted to materials she devised, which are intended to suppress fantasy and imaginative play. Children should not make believe, Montessori proclaimed; to encourage them along such lines is to encourage defects of character." Korney Chukovsky, a well-known author of books for children in the former Soviet Union, describes a period of time in Russia in which a similarly negative view of fantasy was held in academic circles. Parents and educators were discouraged from telling fairy tales to young children because of the potential for confusing children about the real world. Chukovsky received the following letter criticizing the imaginative nature of the poetry he wrote for children.

Shame on you, Comrade Chukovsky, for filling the heads of our children with all sorts of nonsense, such as that trees grow shoes... Why do you
distort realistic facts? Children need socially useful information and not fantastic stories about white bears who cry cock-a-doodle-doo. This is not what we expect from our children’s authors. We want them to clarify for the child the world that surrounds him, instead of confusing his brain with all kinds of nonsense.\textsuperscript{56}

In response Chukovsky wrote that the nonsense that seemed so harmful to the author of the letter not only does not interfere with the child’s orientation to the world that surrounds him, but, on the contrary, strengthens in his mind a sense of the real: and that it is precisely to further the education of children in reality that such nonsense verse should be offered to them. For the child is so constituted that in the first years of his existence we can plant realism in his mind not only directly, by acquainting him with the realities in his surroundings, but also by means of fantasy.\textsuperscript{57}

Chukovsky’s view of how children’s understanding of reality and fantasy proceed hand in hand is echoed in more recent theorizing to be discussed in Chapter 5, when we turn to children’s grasp of the fantasy/reality distinction. For now, I want to note that Chukovsky believed that the negative adult attitudes about fantasy did not substantially curb children’s own pretend activities. He gives the example of the son of a noted Soviet authority on children’s education who discouraged fantasy because he believed that it had a negative impact on children’s understanding of the real world. Despite his father’s views, the boy created a host of imaginary animals, including a red elephant who lived in his room, a bear named Cora, and a tiny baby tiger that sat in his hand and ate from a small plate beside his own at the dinner table. Chukovsky used this example to support his view that children will create their own fantasy tales to supplement any deficit in the stories provided by adults.

Some of the negativity expressed about imaginary companions concerns the view that fantasy behavior is similar to deceit and could lead to habitual lying if not monitored very carefully.\textsuperscript{58} In fact, when lower-middle-class mothers were asked to rate different kinds of child behaviors, their ratings for incidences involving imaginary companions were similar to their ratings for incidences involving lies. The authors concluded that for these mothers, “fantasy and deceit were part of the same global category of children’s behavior.”\textsuperscript{59}

Shirley Brice Heath of Stanford University found some evidence of a relation between a concern for truthfulness and negative attitudes about fantasy in her ethnographic work in a rural southern white community. Her observations on this topic primarily concern parental attitudes about their children’s storytelling. From an early age, young children are taught culturally defined ways of telling stories that are acceptable to their community. The children in this study were strongly discouraged from telling any sort of story that did not conform closely to actual events. Stories with made-up or fanciful characters and imagined happenings were not enjoyed as evidence of the child’s growing imagination. Instead, they were considered to be “lies, without a piece of truth.”\textsuperscript{60} If children described any event in which they interacted with a fantasy character, they were severely admonished. “To do so would shock the adults and cause them to accuse her of ‘telling a story,’ i.e., changing a real incident to make it a lie. In general, only children and the worst scoundrels are ever accused of lying. Thou shalt not lie’ is an adage on the tip of everyone’s tongue, and the community is on the lookout for offenders. Don’t you tell me a story’ means ‘Don’t tell me a lie.’”\textsuperscript{61}

Heath provides some examples of children pretending even though their parents tended to equate pretending with lying. She describes how one small boy tried to claim that a toy truck that he had taken from another child had been made by another truck: “He got a big truck, it makes lotsa lil’ trucks, ’n I got this one.” When he was scolded for his lies, he replied, “Digger Dan talks.”\textsuperscript{62} He had recently seen a storybook at nursery school in which a mechanical crane named Digger Dan was personified. It had a face, a personality, and acted like a hero to little boys and other trucks. The boy seemed to be saying to his mother that his story was no more exaggerated than stories like the one about Digger Dan. In his play at nursery school, this boy created extended fantasies about trucks that flew, talked, and produced other trucks.

Cindy Dell Clark of DePaul University also found evidence of parental concern about fantasy as deceitful in an ethnographic study on culturally shared forms of fantasy.\textsuperscript{63} In particular, parents who identified with fundamentalist Christianity were uncomfortable with cultural myths such as the one about Santa Claus because they were concerned that once their children found out the truth, they would start to question the existence of God. After all, if parents lied about Santa, how was the child to know the parents were not also lying about Jesus? Actually, many young children do seem to think Santa and God are connected in some way.\textsuperscript{64} Children in Clark’s research
suggested that God and Santa must live next door to each other and be friends, that God made Santa, that Santa knows whether children have been good or bad because God told him, and that God is the one who asks Santa to give presents to children.

Although Clark found no evidence that when children learn there is no Santa, they routinely lose their faith in God, parents are sometimes directly questioned on this issue. "One father told of his son asking him if he was really Santa Claus. The father had admitted that he was, after which the boy thought for a while, and then asked if his father was also the Tooth Fairy. Again the father admitted that he was. The son then asked if the father was also the Easter Bunny, and when the father said yes, the son asked, 'Are you God, too?'" Jehovah's Witnesses explicitly discourage parents from teaching children about Santa Claus because they believe that the Santa Claus myth will ultimately have a negative impact on children's belief in God. Clark provides the following quote from The Watch Tower: "One little fellow, sadly disillusioned about Santa Claus, said to a playmate: 'Yes, and I'm going to look into this "Jesus Christ" business too.'"

Clark found that with only one exception, all the children of fundamentalist Christian parents in her study believed that Santa Claus was real, despite the influence of their churches and parents. The exception involved a mother who believed it was better to tell children the truth about Santa and that it was wrong to give Santa credit for gifts and blessings that should be credited to God. Her son's behavior had raised concerns at school because he told many of the other children that Santa was fake and he refused to join the other children in drawing Santa Claus on decorations for Christmas. When interviewed for this study, he pointed out to the interviewer that Santa was Satan with the letters changed.

The mention of Satan brings up the second type of concern that members of some fundamentalist groups have about fantasy, in general, and imaginary companions, in particular. This concern is espoused by fundamentalists who have a particular interest in or preoccupation with spiritual warfare. Parents with this belief system are very concerned about protecting their children from evil forces in the spiritual world. Imaginary companions are sometimes explicitly discussed in this context. For example, in one book on spiritual protection for children, parents are given the following advice: "Many children have imaginary 'friends' they play with. It can be harmless unless the imaginary friend is talking back. Then it is no longer imaginary. . . . A child's dependence on spirit 'friends' will eventually result in spiritual bondage. This must be identified as soon as possible. Satan disguises himself as an angel of light, so young children probably won't see the danger." These authors go on to provide a prayer that parents should teach their children in which they confess to God that they have had an imaginary companion and they renounce this type of activity.

How common is it for parents to worry that an imaginary companion could result in spiritual harm via the devil? There are no studies that accurately document the prevalence of this point of view. In my research with 7-year-old children and their parents, two parents who identified themselves as fundamentalist Christians voiced this kind of concern. One mother told us, "Around our house we try to keep our kids from having imaginary companions. I think they are associated with the devil, and it would be very bad if they had imaginary companions. I try to emphasize that imaginary companions are bad so he doesn't have an imaginary companion." Another mother stated that imaginary companions were anti-Christ and that she was very concerned about her 6-year-old daughter's fantasies involving unicorns. Sometimes the little girl pretended to be a unicorn, shaking invisible wings and making fluttering sounds, and sometimes she seemed to be playing with an imaginary unicorn. According to her mother, this child played with a unicorn because "she wants to be free. She also wants to be a bird for the same reason."

The mother told us that she sometimes played along with her daughter because she loved her, but she tried to hide her daughter's vivid imagination from other people and prayed every day for the devil to leave her child. This little girl was clearly very engaged with pretense, despite her mother's strong objections. Actually this was also the case for the little boy whose mother was quoted above. While his mother was telling the interviewer that imaginary companions are associated with the devil, the boy was telling a research assistant in the next room about his pretend moose friend. In this case, the mother was totally unaware of her son's fantasy.

Our finding that 2 percent of our sample associated imaginary companions with the devil is likely to underestimate the prevalence, because it is probable that fundamentalist parents are dubious about participation in psychological research. Certainly this was true when we conducted research in a Mennonite community. We were interested in the Mennonite faith because our reading of the Men-
nontite literature suggests that this community has quite negative attitudes about children's fantasy. The nature of their objections differs from those of fundamentalist Christians concerned about communications with the devil. Instead, in Mennonite society pretend play is seen, at best, as a waste of time. Mennonites believe that free time or "idleness" is detrimental to children's development. At worst, pretend play is considered a potential threat to the cohesion of the group because of its association with individual freedom of expression.

A general rule in Mennonite communities is that personal development must not intrude upon the concerns of the group. Thus, adults discourage individual incentive for nonphysical activities because they are viewed as harmful to the group and might lead to personal pride and pomposity. This attitude reflects a concern for any activity that makes one stand out from the crowd, including imaginative play. Thus, Mennonite children are discouraged from engaging in any fantasy play that is not directly related to their future roles in the community as mothers, fathers, and farmers. Acceptable reading material for children would be stories that represent an American rural way of life and teach a moral lesson (such as the value of hard work). Stories that have a play or fantasy orientation are considered unacceptable. Mennonite parents "do not want their children to read fairy tales or myths; many object to any stories that are not true such as those in which animals talk and act like people or stories that involve magic, such as 'The Pied Piper of Hamlin.'"

Very little research has been conducted on the pretend play of Mennonite children, with the exception of our small ethnographic study designed to learn how attitudes toward play vary as a function of religion. Carlson interviewed 18 teachers from Mennonite and non-Mennonite private Christian elementary schools in rural Pennsylvania about their attitudes toward fantasy play, as well as their practices relating to children's imagination. We were particularly interested in imaginary companions because restrictions on children's activities or in their lives sometimes actually stimulate this kind of private fantasy activity (see Chapter 4). For example, in her account of growing up in a Mennonite community, Laura Weaver recalled that she and many of her friends had imaginary companions who were "fancy," and thus allowed to wear clothes and play with toys that were off-limits to the children themselves.

Although, overall, the Mennonite teachers were not as positive about social pretense as the non-Mennonite teachers, the reports concerning private fantasy activities painted a different picture. Specifically, the Mennonite teachers were more likely than the other teachers to say that they share their dreams and/or daydreams with their class and that they themselves have active imaginations. They also were more positive about imaginary companions. Unlike their non-Mennonite counterparts, at least some of the Mennonite teachers did not believe that imaginary companions were best grown out of as soon as possible. These teachers were also the only ones who reported that their students, or even they themselves, had imaginary companions. They tended to view having an imaginary companion as making up for a lack of social contact with real friends or siblings. Thus, some of these teachers agreed that they would talk to an imaginary companion for a child's benefit and believed that children would end this type of play on their own as they acquired real friends.

The most detailed account of an imaginary companion was a young Mennonite teacher's description of her own make-believe friend which she "kept" until age 15. The friend's name was "Rachell," and she was the same age and size as "Laura," the teacher. Rachell had blond hair, dark brown eyes, and pretty clothes (but not too fancy). She and Laura had the same abilities and did all the same things; they were inseparable best friends. Laura's favorite activities with Rachell were riding horses and working together as clerks in a store that she imagined their families owned (in reality her parents were farmers). Laura had four sisters and four brothers living at home while she was growing up, which suggests that, in this case, the imaginary companion was not an antidote to loneliness.

What about the Mennonite children? Does their behavior in any way reflect the attitudes documented by Carlson et al.? Carlson observed that these children did not seem to have the conceptual understanding of pretense that would be expected in most mainstream American 6-year-olds. For example, the children appeared to have difficulty with the language used to describe pretense. One day when the children gathered around to inspect a doll brought to school by one of the girls, a child said repeatedly, "It's not a right baby." When questioned by Carlson, it became apparent that the child meant to communicate that the doll was not real. This was only one of several incidences suggesting that the children did not have the vocabulary for talking about fantasy. In fact, one child asked, "What's pretend?"
when he came across this word in a book, and he appeared puzzled by the researcher's attempts to explain its meaning.

Carlson found that on the playground Mennonite children's play themes adhered more closely to everyday family roles and activities than did children's play in the non-Mennonite Christian group, but some of the Old Order Mennonite teachers suspected that a few of the children in their classes had imaginary companions. For example, one teacher reported that she saw a third-grade boy talking to an invisible friend and another boy talking to an imaginary dog. It is possible that the children in orthodox Mennonite communities recognize what is acceptable—or at least tolerable—behavior in the realms of social and nonsocial fantasy play.

The non-Mennonite Christian teachers in this study were more suspicious of imaginary companions. Two of them voiced the concerns about psychopathology or demonic possession that we have discussed as characterizing their fundamentalist orientation. One teacher stated that although she encourages her class to be creative (e.g., imagining their favorite place to be and writing about it), she likes them to be realistic too. "I'd watch out for an imaginary friend. Children should have real friends," she said. She added that a broken home life can lead to the "wrong kind" of imagination. Another teacher from a non-Mennonite Christian school reported that imaginary companions could lead a child into "demon occultist activity." This teacher believed that manipulating make-believe entities in the mind is like witchcraft and thus contrary to a true God.

Overall, it seems clear that the supportive attitudes of parents and other adults are not required for children to create pretend friends. The examples I have described indicate that parents' attempts at curbing their children's fantasy behavior are not entirely successful; at least some children engage in elaborate pretense anyway. The research with Mennonites points to the importance of examining religious and cultural influences on adult attitudes about both social and nonsocial forms of pretense and fantasy. Although Mennonites do not overtly encourage social pretend play, their views concerning imaginary companions suggest that they are more approving of private, nonsocial fantasy.

In this chapter I have described some of the similarities and differences between children who do and do not create imaginary companions. Although children with imaginary companions might be somewhat advanced in their social understanding, and at younger ages they seem a little less shy and more able to focus their attention, they are not much different from other children in most respects. I hope this discussion helps to dispel some of the myths about these children. In Chapter 4, I discuss the diverse roles imaginary companions play in children's lives. Why do children create them? One possibility suggested by the finding that children with imaginary companions tend to have fewer brothers and sisters is that children create pretend friends so they will have someone to play with when nobody else is around. This possibility along with a variety of other answers to this question will be considered next.
Why Do Children Create Imaginary Companions?

The Cat in the Hat by Dr. Seuss begins with two bored children who can't go outside to play because it is too cold and wet. They are sitting around with nothing to do, when suddenly a tall black cat in a red top hat walks through the door and saves the day by entertaining the children for hours with his peculiarities. Everyone has a great time messing up the house until the grownups return. Scholars of popular culture differ in their interpretations of the title character of this story, but he sounds like an imaginary companion to me. For many children, someone like the Cat in the Hat would be an ideal solution to the problem of being stuck in the house on a rainy day, and it is likely that many imaginary companions have their beginnings in scenarios like the one described in Dr. Seuss's story. As discussed in Chapter 3, children who create imaginary companions tend to enjoy social interaction. It makes sense that they would invent companions when no one else is around and they want something interesting to do.

But imaginary companions can be much more than partners in play. They are all-purpose, extraordinarily useful beings. Not only can they provide companionship, they can bear the brunt of a child's anger, be blamed for mishaps, provide a reference point when bargaining with parents (e.g., "Bla Bla doesn't have to finish his dinner, why should I?") or serve as a vehicle for communicating information that a child is reluctant to say more directly (e.g., "Poh is afraid he will go down the drain when he takes a bath"). The purpose of this chapter is to discuss all the various reasons a child might create imaginary companions and the purposes they serve in everyday life.

Outlining the needs met by imaginary companions is a complex task because the companions themselves are so diverse. However, it is often possible to tell a plausible story about the services an imaginary companion provides beyond the primary function of companionship by examining the match between child and companion on a case-by-case basis. The forms that they take, their activities—even their names—provide lots of clues about what the child is attending to in his or her environment. Singer and Singer report several examples of imaginary companions with revealing names—"Phena" and "Barbara Tall" were created by a preschooler who must have heard references to the medication used by her father, "Fetiss" was created by two girls whose mother was pregnant, and "Pigsty" was created by a child whose untidy room was a source of annoyance for the mother.

Imaginary companions can also help children cope with psychological needs that are more substantive than a desire to escape blame or bargain with parents. In fact, many have design features that appear customized to meet the idiosyncratic psychological needs of the child creators. The descriptions of these imaginary companions are fascinating and make up the bulk of this chapter. I have had to rely primarily on case histories because, as far as I know, no comprehensive large-scale studies have systematically matched groups of children with specific kinds of imaginary companions. The problem with case histories, however, is that most have been collected by therapists trying to piece together an understanding of the inner experiences of troubled children. The insights of skilled clinicians are interesting and instructive, but these are exactly the kinds of writings that have contributed to the association of imaginary companions with emotional disturbance. Although some of these authors stress that the children were not referred because of their imaginary companions and the imaginary companions did not play a significant role in the children's treatment, the negative impression created of imaginary companions is hard to avoid.

The fact is many children with emotional problems and children living in stressful situations do have imaginary companions. Why? Because children use fantasy to help cope with problems. Imaginary companions love you when you feel rejected by others, listen when you need to talk to someone, and can be trusted not to repeat what you say. No wonder children who have been traumatized or abused often have them. The tricky point here is that although children with
practicing her violin provides another example of unusual pretend friends who provided great companionship. "I pretend that Beethoven, the Two Strausses, Wagner, and the rest of the composers are still living, and they go skating with me, and when I invite them to dinner, a place has to be set for them; and when I have so many that the table won't hold them all, I make my family sit on one side of their chair to make room for them."³

Other imaginary companions are more closely modeled after playmates of the child's own age, size, and gender—happy, active, and loving children with everyday names like Joel or Susan. Who could be a better partner in play than an imaginary friend? Unlike real children, they can be depended upon to play the game of the child's choice, go along with the child's spontaneous rules, and let the child win. They do not make unwelcome suggestions or insist on taking their turn when the child wants to extend her own. The child doesn't have to worry about an imaginary companion getting cranky and threatening to take his or her toys and go home. On the other hand, the child can walk out on the imaginary companion at any point without repercussion—the companion will be cheerfully ready to start up again at a moment's notice.⁴

Of course, interacting with an imaginary being is not every child's idea of fun. Children differ considerably in how much they enjoy pretending, with some children showing a distinct preference for fantasy play at a very early age. In fact, when Linda Acredolo and her colleagues at the University of California at Davis studied the play behavior of a group of children from infancy through the preschool years, they found that children who at age 4 created imaginary companions showed signs of being more interested in fantasy play than their peers even as infants.⁵ These results suggest that children who create imaginary companions may have a long history of pronounced interest in fantasy play.

Loneliness

They (a brother and sister imaginary companion) come when I am very lonely, not when I am playing with the boys... They are a great comfort to me when I am all alone. (10-year-old child)⁶

Perhaps the claim that children create imaginary companions because they are lonely is only another way of saying that pretend
friends provide companionship, but it has a more hollow sound to it. The case histories that have been used to document loneliness as a reason for creating an imaginary companion tend to describe a deeper aloneness than having no one to play with one day. Certainly, fantasy activities have helped many children through periods of profound loneliness in their lives. For example, fantasy probably played an important role in helping Francis Ford Coppola, the director of The Godfather and many other films, survive a year spent alone in his room as an eight-year-old recovering from polio. He passed the time by reading and acting out stories with his puppets, an unusually intense fantasy experience that may well have contributed to his choice of career.

According to Dr. Humberto Nagera, a professor of psychiatry at the University of Michigan Medical Center who has published many insightful accounts of the children in his clinic, feelings of loneliness, neglect, and rejection frequently motivate the creation of imaginary companions. This claim has been made by several psychologists and is consistent with some research findings. For example, the finding that only and firstborn children are more likely to have imaginary companions (as discussed in Chapter 3) suggests that when play partners are usually available (as is the case when one has siblings), children are less likely to create imaginary companions. Although most of the parents in my research have not been able to identify a specific cause for their children’s imaginary companions, some have mentioned that one appeared when a new baby joined the family, a time when most children receive less attention from parents and may feel lonelier than usual. In fact, Nagera’s case histories include several in which the child developed an imaginary companion when a sibling was born.

Tony was about three years old when his first sibling, a boy, was born. He was totally unprepared for this event. When Tony saw the baby for the first time, he looked away and then continued to ignore the baby. Immediately after the brother’s birth, Tony pretended to have an imaginary friend by the name of ‘Dackie’ with whom he played and talked for hours at a time. Dackie was around most of the day, getting up in the morning with Tony and going to bed when Tony did. Dackie remained with Tony until he was five years old. Yet, at the age of ten, Tony still remembered Dackie, and when he was reminded of his imaginary companion, he laughed in a shy way.

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In the next example taken from Nagera’s work, loneliness was not due to a lack of potential play partners—the patient was the fifth of seven children. Despite being from such a large family, he was very lonely as a child. He tried to be a good older brother but felt angry when the younger children would not do what he said. The creation of an imaginary blind brother began shortly after he punched one of his brothers and was accused of nearly blinding the boy. Nagera writes:

The brother is younger, like his own brothers, but his blindness makes him totally dependent on him; he cannot go anywhere without him and never wants to leave him. Being with his older brother, walking with him, feeling his arm over his shoulders, or sitting close to him, is the happiest experience for the blind brother. There is no one else he wishes to be with, not anyone else who understands him as well. As they walk together they arouse everyone’s attention. At first people say, “Look at the blind boy,” but immediately afterward they say: “How fortunate he is to have this wonderful big brother, what an unusual child he is to be so good and helpful to his blind brother!” This part of the fantasy gave the patient the greatest satisfaction each time he thought of it, as it contained both the gratification of his exhibitionistic wishes—everyone looked—and the relief about his guilt for his destructive wishes, when he was praised for his kindness toward the younger brother.

Although the imaginary blind brother probably provided this child with some relief from his loneliness, it also seems to have served a number of other psychological functions. For example, it suggests a theme of competence which appears in many other descriptions of imaginary companions.

Issues of Competence

Professor Susan Harter and Christine Chao at the University of Denver have argued that a child might fashion an imaginary companion in at least two different ways to help achieve feelings of competence or mastery. One possibility is that a child might create an imaginary companion that is helpless and incompetent, making the child look good in comparison. On the other hand, by creating an imaginary companion that is exactly the opposite—extremely competent—the child acquires a powerful ally that might bolster his or her self-esteem.
Harter and Chao interviewed 40 children with imaginary companions (20 girls and 20 boys) to determine if the imaginary companions tended to be viewed as more or less competent than the children themselves. They found that girls tended to create imaginary companions that were particularly incompetent—15 of the 20 girls created imaginary companions who were described as less competent than themselves. Boys, on the other hand, were more likely to create imaginary companions that were especially competent—14 of the 20 boys described imaginary companions that were more competent than the boys themselves.

Here are some of the things that girls had to say about their incompetent imaginary companions: "She doesn't know any colors, so I have to tell her"; "She just falls down when she tries to go hop"; "I can run faster than they can, so when they get tired they watch me run"; "I have to teach him his letters every day because he can't remember so good."13 The following description provides a more detailed portrait of the kinds of imaginary companions typical of girls:

His name is Kitty Cat. When I'm doing puzzles, he gets them undone. He doesn't know how. He doesn't have friends, just me. He's usually bad. He usually falls off [the jungle gym] and I catch him; he's kinda scared so I get him down. He can't tie his shoes so I tie them for him, I tie his paws. He can't count, he just meows. He doesn't know how to swing, so I push him, but he falls off. I have to help him hop. He's scared at night, so I get him waked up and put him in my bed.14

In contrast, the spontaneous comments of the boys include: "He can run faster than all the other children"; "He is bigger than me, and he can draw better and skip better"; "On the jungle gym, he gets to the top fastest." Here is the description of a boy's imaginary companion that is given as an example of a competent pretend friend:

His name is Christian the Monster Magician, and he can do lots of things a lot! He's tall, he's big, he's bigger than me. He can jump so high, he can jump from the barbershop, where he cuts his hair, all the way home. He can jump pretty far, can't he? He can jump on both feet and make one foot go up and he can make magic, he can make a still come out of his foot! That's hard to walk on, high stilts, but that's what Christian can do, the highest stilts in the world! That's scary, but he's not scared. Not Christian the Monster Magician, no sir!15

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It is important to note that in their ratings of their own competence, the girls and boys did not differ. Thus, the gender difference in the type of imaginary companions the children created did not arise from differences in the children's own self-concepts. Instead, the results seem to reflect the sex-role stereotypes that preschool children already know very well. Girls believe that they need to be able to nurture and help, whereas boys are supposed to be strong and powerful. These themes are also reinforced in fantasy toys. The baby dolls and similar toys that girls typically play with provide a model for incompetent kinds of imaginary companions. In contrast, the doll figures that are given to boys—the action figure, superman type of character—suggest a different kind of fantasy. Although Harter and Chao focus on the imaginary companions that are completely pretend, children might be influenced by the types of fantasy toys that have been provided for them.

These results suggest a different method of dealing with issues of mastery for boys and girls. Boys create an imaginary companion that has the characteristics they would like to have themselves. Girls, on the other hand, play the role of the more competent individual in the relationship between the imaginary companion and self. Obviously, this gender difference is a general tendency, rather than what always occurs—the blind brother example provides a counterexample of a boy who created a less competent imaginary companion. Dipper, the flying dolphin described in Chapter 2, was created by a girl, but was one of the most powerful and competent imaginary companions I have encountered. In Chapter 6, I describe Alice, another extremely competent imaginary companion created by a girl. Alice saved the girl and her sister from a giant crocodile that tried to eat them, and was on hand "when the monstrous rat at my grandmother's was about to bite me and she came out of who-knows-where to save me at the right moment."

Despite these counterexamples, the finding that boys tend to have heroic and competent imaginary companions, whereas girls' imaginary companions tend to be incompetent is interesting. Perhaps Harter and Chao's result is related to the gender difference Carlson and I found in the kinds of fantasy play preschool boys and girls enjoy. In Chapter 3, I discussed our work showing that preschool girls create more imaginary companions than boys, but many boys create imaginary characters that they act out or impersonate. If Harter and
Chao’s research can be interpreted as showing general tendencies in the kinds of characters boys and girls enjoy creating, then it is not surprising that many boys might choose to impersonate the imagined character rather than treat it as a separate entity. After all, characters who have special powers and are particularly competent are exactly the sort of beings it would be interesting to act out oneself. On the other hand, if girls tend to create characters that need to be helped and nurtured, then it makes sense that the character would be imagined as a separate individual. Thus, the tendency for girls to have imaginary companions and boys to impersonate an imagined character might be related to gender-linked differences in the characters that populate their imaginations in early childhood.

Restrictions or limitations in one’s own life

The imaginary companions in our research have included many that were not subject to the same restrictions as the child (e.g., the imaginary companion did not have to eat foods it didn’t like and did not have to go to bed at a particular time). Other imaginary companions were able to surpass their child creators in certain ways (e.g., on the day that one of the children in our study was given a small bowl of fish, the imaginary companion received a huge tank of sharks). These sorts of characteristics are quite commonplace in descriptions of imaginary companions. Another example is provided by Jean Piaget, who described how his daughter consoled herself, after failing to “tame” a grasshopper, by commenting on the ability of her imaginary friend Marecage to do so. “Marecage tamed a grasshopper. She had one that followed her everywhere; it went for walks with her and came home with her.”16

As children encounter problems in their everyday lives or become frustrated in their efforts to accomplish a goal, they often make up stories about an imaginary companion overcoming the difficulty of the moment. Sometimes, however, the most central traits of the companion correspond to more pervasive types of restrictions or limitations in the child’s life. For example, J. Singer and Steineker report that although the play of blind children generally is more reality oriented than the play of sighted children, almost all of the blind children in their sample had an imaginary companion who could see.7 Although D. Singer did not find a similar pattern in a sample of deaf children, one autobiographical account of a hearing-impaired

woman suggests that the imaginary companion she created as a 6-year-old played an important role in the expression of her feelings about being hard-of-hearing. In fact, when as an adult she wrote about her childhood experiences, she dedicated the book to him. Here is an excerpt:

Wrinkel was invisible and inaudible, which left him free to do and say whatever he wanted. The first time he entered a room he found the exact center of the ceiling and drove in a large invisible staple. He tossed an invisible rope ladder through the staple, festooning it over the tops of pictures, curtain poles, and chandeliers, and climbed over people’s heads, listening to their talk and making nonsense of it.

Wrinkel was smarter than anybody—smarter than my sister Ann. For one thing, he was a boy. For another thing, though he could hear as perfectly as Ann could, he didn’t care whether he heard perfectly or not. He chose to hear, and to act on what he heard, strictly as he had a mind to.

When people talked and talked and Wrinkle didn’t make sense of what they said, that wasn’t because he didn’t hear it. It was because he liked to make nonsense by weaving his own name in and out of their sentences. . . .

He killed people off for me all the time. He killed off all the ones I didn’t like—the ones who cleared their throats pointedly or raised their voices at me, as if they thought I might not hear them. He killed off the deadpans, when they mumbled some question at me.18

In her book on play therapy, Playing for Their Lives, Dorothy Singer describes a little boy whose attention deficit disorder and hyperactivity affected his language development, making it difficult for him to understand what was being said and to express himself. With his imaginary friend, Petey, he had none of the frustrations involved in trying to communicate with real people. Singer writes:

I watched as Marty “talked” to Petey. . . . His speech, racing along, was unintelligible to me, filled with nonsense words, his own private vocabulary, but obviously affording him pleasure. He was peaceful as he played—for the longest time he had remained with one game. . . . Petey was Marty’s “friend.” Petey made no demands on Marty. It didn’t matter if Marty used gibberish to communicate with him.19

There are several case histories of imaginary companions created by children with different sorts of physical difficulties. For example, Wickes describes cases in which an imaginary companion helped
a child compensate by not needing glasses or by being athletic. A 10-year-old child seen as a patient by Bender and Vogel because of behavior problems—partly due to clumsiness, tics, and grimaces—had an imaginary monkey friend named Fatto who was graceful, agile, and strong: "Fatto can swim and jump over the Empire State Building."

Bender and Vogel described Fatto as allowing the child to live out his desire to be physically strong and athletic because he could do things that the clumsy, awkward boy could not. These authors believe that imaginary companions generally play a positive constructive role in personality development because they help children compensate for some lack or deficiency in their experiences. They describe 14 case studies in which children seem to create imaginary companions in response to an unsatisfactory parent-child relationship or unsatisfactory experiences in the world because of unfavorable social or economic conditions. Bender and Vogel write, "Far from representing a willful and malicious 'flight from reality,' this phantasy represents the child's normal effort to compensate for a weak and inadequate reality to round out his incomplete life experiences and to help create a more integrated personality to deal with the conflicts of his individual life."

As suggested above, the restrictions or limitations in children's lives that become thematically related to imaginary companions are not limited to the physical realm. One of the cases described by Frances Wickes concerned a little girl named Sally whose family had recently suffered substantial financial difficulties. The child invented a little girl named Sally the Second who dressed in a blue velvet coat trimmed with fur and whose rich father gave her everything she wanted.

Sometimes the imaginary companion substitutes for a relationship that the child does not have in real life. For example, in their discussion of children's reactions to an absent or dead father, Burlingham and Freud mention the case of a young boy who created an imaginary father. This child's mother was unmarried, and he had never known his father. Machtinger discusses this case in the following way:

Bob's fantasy father was better than everyone else ("his feet were bigger than anyone else's"); "he owned a big car with lots of wheels on it;" "he had golden hair and lovely pink eyes, etc.), and he grew very sensitive when anyone appeared not to accept his stories about his "father." What

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is interesting about this child's fantasy father is that the change in the fantasies over time reflected the child's own developmental needs and thus mirrored the changes in the role of the father in the course of development.

The fantasy father, one strategy for coping with the absence of a real father, also provides the child with a strong and powerful ally, as discussed in the section on competence. Once again, it is important to note that an imaginary companion can serve a variety of purposes.

Avoiding blame

There's a little girl called Choany he has had since he could talk. I think she must be his naughty self, because every time anything goes wrong, Choany has done it.

It's always Creep-Mouse. "Who's done it?"—"Oh, I haven't—Creep-Mouse has done it!"

Imaginary companions are convenient scapegoats, and most of them probably serve in this way at one time or another. Princess Margaret of the House of Windsor is said to have used her imaginary companion to avoid blame. Whenever she was confronted by her nanny about having done something wrong, she would say, "It wasn't me—it was Cousin Halifax." There are a couple of different interpretations of this function. One view is that using the imaginary companion as a scapegoat is part of the process in which these children develop self-control. In his discussion of this function Nagera writes,

Perhaps we will be less inclined to underestimate the value of the imaginary companion if we take into account that many of the controls that we demand of the very young child are often beyond his limited capacities. In this respect, we can again observe definite similarities with the role played by fantasizing and fantasies in later life. Both are used in the attempt to solve conflicts and to restore, at least transitarily, the inner equilibrium before excessive stress forces a path into symptom formation, regression, or other disturbances.

Similarly, Newson and Newson write,

We may look upon play not simply as a way of repeating life experiences in an attempt to master their emotional implications, nor solely as a re-
hearsal, symbolic or direct, of roles or of desires: but as the means by which the child tries out his emotions in a protected context, in preparation for the time when he will be held responsible for his actions and will be expected to exercise reasonable control over his feelings.29

The process of blaming and sometimes punishing the companion might also help children to identify and internalize the expectations of parents.30 The imaginary companion embodies a characteristic or behavior that is deemed unacceptable and is distanced from the self by attributing it to the imaginary companion. In doing so, children try to avoid criticism from the parents and maintain their self-esteem, even though they have just done something wrong. According to Fraiberg,

The child acquires a number of companions, imaginary ones, who personify his Vices like characters in a morality play. (The Virtues he keeps to himself. Charity, Good Works, Truth, Altruism, all dwell in harmony within him.) Hate, Selfishness, Uncleanliness, Envy, and a host of other evils are cast out like devils and forced to obtain other hosts. . . . When Daddy's pipes are broken, no one is more indignant than the two-year-old son under suspicion. "Gerald (the imaginary companion), did you break daddy's pipes?" he demands to know.31

I have known of several cases in which children have had two imaginary companions, one good and one bad (e.g., a good invisible person named Folkers and a bad invisible person named Favors). In some respects, this use of pretend friends resembles, at least superficially, the psychological process known as "splitting." When splitting occurs, a person's desirable and undesirable characteristics are separated into polar extremes. In psychopathology, splitting tends to be associated with serious disorders, such as borderline personality disorder, in which individuals show disturbances in basic identity or sense of self, and dissociative identity disorder, in which two or more distinct personalities exist within the same individual. These disorders should not be confused with the inclination of some children to associate primarily bad or primarily good characteristics with an imaginary companion. There is an order of magnitude between the two. Some clinicians believe that children's tendency to blame their imaginary companions for their misdeeds might actually help resolve issues about the child's behaviors and characteristics that others deem unacceptable. As Fraiberg suggests, "While a childhood dilemma might initiate the emergence of imaginary figures, suggesting a splitting pattern, an opportunity for the child to use her capacity for fantasy, usually with parental tolerance, may actually help resolve the dilemma and avert a more serious persistence of 'good me' and 'bad me' beliefs."32

Research investigating the relation between having an imaginary companion as a child and later-developing pathology shows that patients with borderline personality disorder are actually less likely to recall playing with imaginary companions than patients with other types of disorders. The relation between dissociative identity disorder and having an imaginary companion as a child is more complex and will be discussed later in this chapter. For now, the important point is that having an imaginary companion that embodies some negative characteristics should not be equated with the sort of splitting that occurs in psychopathology.

Fears

Going to the bass-wood tree was an adventure, but we always felt safe with Aida Paida. She went to walk with us too. There was always a little circle of security about Aida Paida and we moved in it with her. Things that might have got us never could. Aida Paida never did anything to them, but they could never get at us. She made them keep their distance.33

Fantasy play of various types can play a powerful role in children's ability to overcome fear. This point was brought home to me by my daughter's reaction at age 3 to the gift of a small box described as containing a "baby ghost." Amber had developed a fear of ghosts that disrupted her sleep and made her anxious when left alone at bedtime. However, when asked if she would like to take care of the baby ghost, she was eager to do so. For more than a week she carried the box with its invisible contents with her wherever she went and was very much absorbed in this fantasy.34 The baby ghost and its box were eventually abandoned for other toys, but Amber was never again bothered by a fear of ghosts. Conceptualizing the ghost in the box as something weak, tiny, and in need of care seemed to remove the scariness from her thoughts about ghosts in general.

The role that fantasy can play in the overcoming of fears is well known to play therapists. One clinical technique, known as emotive imagery, was specifically designed for helping children cope with
their fears and anxieties by working hero images into stories involving the child’s fears. For example, a child who is afraid of the dark and loves Superman might be told to imagine situations in which he is waiting in a dark place for instructions for helping Superman. Arnold Lazarus has found that the positive aspects of such imagery help children overcome their fears. “Some people may be concerned that the emotive imagery procedure plays tricks with a child’s mind and encourages the child to daydream and to dwell on fantasy rather than reality,” he writes. “I have treated many dozens of children with emotive imagery and have found no negative side effects. I have never come across a child who failed to differentiate fantasy from reality in the emotive imagery.”

Fantasy can be used in therapy in other ways that help children with their fears, as well as other types of issues. Nagera describes a 4-year-old boy who used stuffed animals (a crocodile and tiger) during sessions in which he felt anxious after being aggressive toward the therapist. For example, the child might kick the therapist and then warn that the stuffed animals would defend him if the therapist retaliated. This play developed into what might be described as imaginary companions. Nagera writes,

Later in treatment when his fear of being smacked by the father increased—a fear that had a reality basis—he began to protect himself further by taking the two powerful allies home. If this was not allowed, he took them in his “imagination” by pretending that he had put them in his pocket. In the following sessions he would comment spontaneously or in response to my questions how these animals had frightened his father, who then did not dare smack him.

In these examples adults have scaffolded the child’s use of fantasy, but children often discover fantasy solutions for dealing with fears by themselves. For example, John Gottman describes two children who frequently pretended to comfort dolls who were afraid of the dark. The game was abruptly dropped when the children themselves were no longer afraid of the dark. The descriptions of many imaginary companions suggest that their creation was motivated at least partly by the need to master a fear. Singer and Singer describe a child who, after being caught outside during a heavy rain, replaced her regular imaginary companion. When asked if a place should be set at the table for Louisa, the child announced, “Louisa was drowned in the big puddle!” Then she requested that a place be set for her new imaginary companion, Frogman, who was “not afraid of puddles.”

Anna Freud described a case of a boy (age 7) who had an imaginary tame tiger who loved and obeyed the boy but scared everyone else. In another case study reported by Selma Fraiberg, a child created an imaginary companion named Laughing Tiger at a time when she was very afraid of animals, especially some dogs who lived nearby. The important thing about Laughing Tiger was that he laughed instead of growled and was extremely gentle and compliant. He was quite afraid of children, especially his creator, who tended to boss him around. The child’s fear of animals immediately abated when Laughing Tiger first appeared, and by the time he disappeared the fear was essentially gone. Fraiberg notes that the child might have coped with her fears in much less productive ways, such as avoiding animals, not leaving the home, or staying close to her parents. “If we watch closely, we will see how the imaginary companions and enemies fade away at about the same time that the fear dissolves, which means that the child who has overcome his tigers in his play has learned to master his fear.”

A means of communicating with others

Sometimes it is easier to ask questions about a “friend’s” situation or to describe the reactions of a “friend,” than to talk about yourself. Hence, communications to doctors, psychologists, and other professionals are often prefaced by “I have a friend who wants to know...” or “I have a friend who has this problem...” Often it is clear to everyone involved in such communications that the person is actually talking about himself or herself. There are many situations in which imaginary companions can provide a veil in just this way to make communication easier for a young child. For example, maybe the child is reluctant to admit being afraid of something, but wants some reassurance relevant to his or her fear. Singer and Singer describe a child whose imaginary companion, Poh, took baths with him. The child often asked the parent supervising the bath to make sure Poh did not go down the drain. The parents believed the child was using the companion to express his own fear of the drain, an interpretation that is consistent with their observation that he was very much relieved after hearing Mister Rogers sing the “You can’t go down the drain” song.
One of the children studied by Newson and Newson used her companion for expressing negative emotions in a way that cushioned their possible impact. When upset with her mother, this child would say to her, "I don't love you, but Noddy (the imaginary companion) does." The continued love of Noddy may have seemed to the child to weaken the blow of her angry communication or indicate that in some part of herself she still loved her mother. Similarly, when Jean Piaget's daughter Jacqueline was upset with him, she would sometimes talk about the mean father of her imaginary companion Marecage. "Marecage has a horrid father. He calls her in when she's playing. . . . Her mother chose badly." By maligning the father of an imaginary companion, this child was able to communicate all sorts of nasty feelings about her own father in an indirect, thinly disguised way that nevertheless felt safe. Another example is provided by a 3-year-old boy who claimed to have a pretend friend who lived in his throat. This boy had a habit of saying things like "My Throat says I don't like peas" or "Throat says I'm not sleepy." The mother sometimes asked her son to open his mouth so she could have it out with Throat directly.

Parents can exploit the imaginary companion for their own communicative purposes. If you want to know how your child feels about a sensitive topic, you might try asking about the imaginary companion's feelings. It also can sometimes be easier for children to express difficult things by whispering to an imaginary companion in the presence of an adult, rather than by telling the adult directly. Therapists often use this technique: they suggest that the children whisper what they want to say to a stuffed animal in the therapy room.

Response to trauma

She gave me her undivided attention as I poured out all my hurts, all my betrayals, all my goodness and my badness. She never told. She never scolded me.

This is how Mary Jane, a pretend girl with "the most beautiful chocolate skin, great big happy eyes, a million dollar smile and long black curly hair" was remembered by the woman who had created her as a child to help cope with life in a dysfunctional and chaotic family. No wonder she also recalled deep feelings of love for the little invisible girl. Many children use pretend play to help cope with terrible life events related to war, medical conditions, abuse, poverty, and loss.

Why Do Children Create Imaginary Companions?

In fact, children in the Auschwitz concentration camps were observed to play a game called "going to the gas chamber." Reports of the use of pretense by children who have been traumatized sometimes include descriptions of imaginary companions. In one case study, a 6-year-old boy whose paralyzed mother actively rejected him and whose father was retarded developed a fantasy about being the leader of a gang.

I got a gang. I got friends—three, six. They run away so I got running away (the child had run away from home). The biggest one is 14 years. I'm the littlest. I am the leader. They want me to be. They just sit there. They don't do anything else. The big boy got the idea first. His mother isn't good to him. That is why he runs away. His mother killed his father with a knife. I don't like my mother because the other boys don't like their mothers. I'm afraid my mother will kill my father. She doesn't like my father, nor me, or the baby—not anybody.

Another example of an imaginary companion taken from Nagera's cases is Susan, an invisible friend created by a 5-year-old girl at the time that her parents divorced and her mother was hospitalized for mental illness. Two older children in the family reacted with school difficulties, sleep disturbances, and regression (bed wetting). Nagera attributes Miriam's lack of these symptoms to the presence of her imaginary companion. Miriam looked after Susan (the imaginary companion), talking with her for hours, often asking questions such as, "What happened to Mummy?" Susan also was consulted for advice and seemed to function as a way for Miriam to express her feelings. Susan eventually faded away when Miriam developed a very close friendship with a child at her school.

In another case study, the child created several imaginary companions as part of her reaction to wartime changes in her life situation. This child lived for 18 months in a nursery set up for children during World War II. After the war she was reunited with her mother and a stepfather. The adjustment was very difficult as she missed her caretaker and the children in the nursery. According to her mother, "She has a brood of imaginary animals, cats and chickens which live with her and share all her activities. It is quite uncanny the way she looks at them, just as though she could really see them. Often she tells me off for clumsily kicking one of them or I have to lift them up over the pavement and am told that 'they are too small,' or 'they can't manage.'"

Until 4 years of age, the little girl surrounded herself with this
flock of imaginary animals, supplemented at times with other individuals, such as an imaginary husband. When she was 4, her mother reported, "We now have a pony living with us. It has red ears, a red nose, and red legs, and sleeps in the corner standing on two legs. Of course, he accompanies us everywhere, busses included, but I can generally persuade him to go into my shopping bag when the bus is too full." The interpretation given to these fantasies was that in helping and looking after the needs of these imaginary creatures, the little girl was somehow coping with her traumatic history.51

A boy who had been kidnapped and held for ransom at the age of 3 provided a vivid account of his imaginary companion to Lenore Terr, a child psychiatrist who is an expert on childhood trauma:

I called my fake person "Olive." I named him for a jar of stuffed olives I saw on the table. I made him up a couple of years ago when I was five, and I still have him in my mind. Olive never speaks... I pretend Olive is dead. I look up at the sky now and I see his face. Olive was just my age. He had black hair, a light blue face, and yellow eyes... I made him up because I picked up a rotten olive... On my birthday, Olive died. He was going outside, and he had a heart attack. I called the hospital. And they said they were all filled up. Then I didn't know what to do. Then Olive died.52

According to Terr, the child had "split off" the weaker, less positive aspects of himself to create Olive. She suggests that the boy's good adjustment after the kidnapping—his ability to do well in school, have many friends, and be well behaved—was in part due to the Olive fantasy. In therapy, she encouraged him to be more accepting of his own imperfections and accept the characteristics of Olive as part of himself.

When young children are injured in some way and have to spend time in the hospital or have repeated visits to the doctor, they can experience considerable trauma associated with the pain of the injury, fear about medical procedures, and anxiety about being separated from home and family. In her book The Widening World of Childhood, Lois Murphy gives a detailed description of how one 3-year-old coped with the traumatic events associated with an accidental amputation of his finger, which included surgery to reattach the finger. Being given injections of penicillin over the course of treatment, and repeated visits to the doctor's office to have the dressing changed.

The office visits were particularly difficult for the child, in part because of the doctor's decision not to allow the mother in the treatment room. At the beginning of the appointment, the child typically had to be pried off his mother while screaming, "I want my Mommy!" About a week after these visits began, the boy told his mother that an elf named Woody had appeared in the treatment room to keep him company. After this first appearance, Woody turned up on a regular basis, both at home and at the doctor's office.

Playing doctor, Sam said to me, "You take your medicine and you won't have to have penicillin." "You have to stay in the hospital all day and all night." When I asked him how I could manage to do that he told me there was a little elf, "Woody," who would stay with me, just like it was at Dr. H's office—Woody was there with him because I couldn't be with him.

At Dr. H's office he cried hard when leaving me and while soaking his finger... I asked him why he had made such a fuss at the doctor's office and he said, "Because Woody wasn't there—he was on vacation."

Later, when we were making brownies he said, "Woody used to make brownies when he was a little boy—he told me that at Dr. H's office."53

Woody clearly played an important role in Sam's ability to cope with his injury. Once Woody started showing up in the treatment room, Sam's crying and fussing abated, and he became focused on asking the doctor detailed questions about the stitches, the shaping of the new fingernail, and so on. Later on, when Sam started school he experienced some difficulty with the separation from his mother, and once again Woody helped out by showing up at school when Sam needed him.

Another type of trauma in the lives of some children is physical and sexual abuse at the hands of a parent, neighbor, or relative. According to Dr. Frank Putnam, chief of the Unit on Dissociative Disorders at the National Institute of Health, about 89 percent of the children who are abused have imaginary companions.54 Thus, it appears that abused children may frequently turn to fantasy as part of their response to their difficult life situations. In cases of severe and prolonged abuse, some individuals go on to develop dissociative identity disorder (previously known as multiple personality disorder).55 As mentioned earlier, dissociative identity disorder is diagnosed when a person seems to have more than one distinct personality that at times take control of the person's body outside of their awareness. A person with dissociative identity disorder might
suddenly realize that he or she cannot remember what has happened over the past few days or even months, a time when the alter personality was active.

What is the relationship between imaginary companions and the personalities of dissociative identity disorder? Unlike the alter personalities of dissociative identity disorder, the imaginary companion does not take over the body of the child, does not operate outside the child’s awareness, and is involved in everyday interactions with the child. In some cases, however, an alter personality can be traced back to the imaginary companion a child had when she or he became the victim of abuse, or an imaginary companion that was invented to help the child cope with the abusive situation.56 This does not in any way suggest that children who have imaginary companions are at risk for developing dissociative identity disorder. First of all, the vast majority of imaginary companions are created for reasons that are totally unrelated to abuse. In addition, although individuals with dissociative identity disorder almost always have a history of abuse, the victims of child abuse are relatively unlikely to develop alter personalities. Dissociative identity disorder is now being diagnosed more frequently than in the past, but it is still rare, certainly much rarer than child abuse. Finally, only a subset of people with dissociative identity disorder report having had imaginary companions as children.57

Still, it is possible to learn something about the characteristics of imaginary companions invented as a response to abuse from people with dissociative identity disorder. Dr. Barbara Sanders of the University of Connecticut has recently conducted research in which she interviewed patients diagnosed with dissociative identity disorder about imaginary companions. She found that 14 of the 22 patients who participated in her study remembered having imaginary companions as children.58 Most of these companions were described as being playmates of the same age and sex. Although the primary function served by these entities was companionship, the patients also mentioned a variety of functions that were related to the experience of abuse. For example, the imaginary companions kept secrets, hid memories, endured sex, pain, and abuse, and felt sad for these children. One was described as an impish brat who answered back and was defiant; another was a tall male bodyguard.

One description was very similar to that of an imaginary companion in my own research. The one described by Sanders was an energetic girl who had long curls and cleaned the house a lot. The child we interviewed told us about a “ghost sister” named Olivia who was the same size and age as the little girl herself. Olivia was a very good girl who cleaned the kitchen, swept the floor, and dusted the house. The girl’s parents reported that she started to talk about Olivia shortly after she was sexually abused by a neighbor. The similarity in the descriptions of Olivia and the imaginary companion in Sanders’s report raises the question of whether systematic differences might be found if the imaginary companions created by abused children were compared with those of nonabused children. Perhaps certain themes such as being particularly good, putting things in order, or cleaning behaviors might be relatively more common for the imaginary companions of abused children.

Sanders speculates that the experience of having an imaginary companion is quite different for abused children who go on to develop dissociative identity disorder as adults than for other children. She suggests that in the former case, the imaginary companion might be more likely to engage in actions which run counter to the child’s wishes or for which the child is amnesic. An alternative possibility is that the vividness and intensity of the fantasy experience could be at the root of this perceived uncontrollability of the imaginary companion’s actions. Even in cases in which no abuse has occurred, children who are intensely involved with their imaginary companions may sometimes feel unable to control their actions. (This point will be discussed more fully in Chapters 7 and 8.)

One of the noteworthy aspects of our interview with the child who created Olivia was that she talked about her openly and with affection, despite the fact that the timing of Olivia’s arrival in the family suggested that the ghost sister had been created in response to abuse. This point is important because some psychologists have suggested that a child will talk freely about an imaginary companion only if it serves the normal purposes of fun and companionship.59 Fantasies created to fulfill other needs are believed to be guarded as secrets by young children. However, our research suggests that children talk openly about their imaginary companions, even when they seem to have been created for special needs.

A final point is that the elaborate and imaginative play of the children described in this section is not the type of play that clinicians point to when describing troubled children. In fact, the play of abused and neglected children is usually found to be strikingly less
creative than that of their peers. In addition, abused children tend to show none of the joy and delight that routinely accompany the everyday play of other children. Lenore Terr characterizes the play that follows trauma as “grim and monotonous.” Left to their own devices in a play therapy room, abused children engage in activities that lack coherence, spontaneity, and positive affect. Their pretense appears unimaginative and literal, such as “the child who sweeps the floor, washes the play dishes and play clothes, carefully arranges stray toys, and then quietly waits for his or her parent to arrive.” Thus, although some children create imaginary companions as a response to trauma, this in itself is not a bad sign. It is the children who lack the capacity to play freely, creatively, and happily who are more likely to elicit the concern of clinicians.

A method of processing interesting or significant events and people

Interactions with imaginary companions often include elements from the real lives of the children. It is as if play with an imaginary companion provides a forum for mulling over or thinking about things that catch their attention. Many of the topics listed in this chapter—issues of mastery or competence, fears, communication to parents, responses to trauma, and so on—are examples of this, but it is important to point out that the events addressed in play with an imaginary companion can be mundane. The child can enact with the imaginary companion any situation or event. This activity often helps children to reduce the anxiety associated with the event and to gain understanding of it. For example, when someone in the family has an injury such as a broken arm, the child might pretend that the imaginary companion has a broken arm, and act out a variety of hospital and home scenarios associated with the injury.

Wickes describes how the children in a family killed off an imaginary companion after they attended a funeral. One of the children, now grown up, said,

Mrs. Comphret lived under the cellar stairs. She was short and plump and comfortable, and she was always smiling. She wore a little black bonnet tied in a neat bow under her chin.

One day a neighbor died. There was a funeral, a “finnernal.” We children called it. We were very much impressed with the solemnity and hush. It was not very real to us except as an impressive bit of drama, but in that way it seemed very mysterious and important. Then one day Mrs. Comphret died and had a “finnernal.” It was strange to have her go but she never came back. I knew she never would.

An imaginary companion can also provide a way of thinking about things that the child has heard about, but not experienced firsthand—cultural backgrounds or lifestyles that intrigue the child. Jalongo describes a case in which a 4-year-old white child invented an imaginary companion who was a large Native American man. The mother of this child first became aware of the imaginary companion when she observed her daughter becoming agitated while looking at a storybook. Finally, the little girl slammed the book shut and left the room. The mother followed her into the next room and asked what was wrong. The child replied, “If there’s one thing I can’t stand, it’s an Indian looking over my shoulder.”

Imagining her Indian companion allowed this child to have a connection with a culture that was not accessible to her in real life. Play can do this and much more for children. It is a natural medium for self-expression, communication, release of feelings, and mentally digesting experiences and situations. The capacity of young children to use their imaginary companions for all these purposes is truly impressive. In particular, children have a wonderful ability to draw upon the power of their imaginations to help them survive life difficulties.

But does a dark side lurk in all this use of fantasy in early childhood? Does too much pretending muddle children’s grasp of the difference between fantasy and reality? Do they sometimes lose track and perhaps believe their imaginary companions are real? These are the questions I’ll address in the next chapter.