Imaginary Playmates...

A Child’s Mind Game

If you want surprises tickling your senses then start observing a child around you—especially a toddler. Children of this age are at the point of their life where things they come across do not require a logical explanation. They are free to involve the unknown and the known aspects to their capacities of understanding, which is just learning to blossom. For them making friends even with the non-living things around them—their Barbie doll or their favorite GI Joe—is not illogical at all. This is the age when they never complain, 'I don’t have a friend' because at this age their thoughts and imaginations are completely unshackled.

Children of the age group of 2-6 years have just begun their journey through life – they are trying to understand the complications of reality and the fantasies of fairy tales—it’s an overlapping phase. It is a part of the learning process for them—socializing, communicating, gaining a conscious mind and exploring the creative part of their minds. They tend to improvise their vocabulary and their power of imagination slowly during this phase. And so, having an imaginary playmate is fairly common among children of this age. Not that it is something to worry. On the contrary, it is assumed to have a positive effect on children’s social and cognitive development.

According to Lawrence Kutner, an American child psychologist: “Imaginary companions are an integral part of many children’s lives. They provide comfort in times of stress, companionship when they’re lonely, someone to boss around when they feel powerless, and someone to blame for the broken lamp in the living room. Most important, an imaginary companion is a tool young children use to help them make sense of the adult world.”

Some experts think that children with imaginary playmates are at least average intelligence, possess good verbal skills, are characterized as creative and cooperative with adults, and generally are an only child. They belong to families that value active behavior than passive behavior. These children watch less television than other children of their age. Imaginary playmates can be drawn from television characters, stories, or real people, or can also be original characters developed by the child.

According to studies, pre-schoolers who invent imaginary friends are not, as we think, lonely, withdrawn, unable to make real friends, or inadequately parented. As a matter of fact, studies have shown such children are well adjusted, creative, and make friends easily. They are also more verbal and cooperative and less likely to be bored. There is some evidence that children with imaginary playmates may be more creative in later life.

If the gender differences are considered, in one study boys tended to have imaginary friends who were more competent than they were and girls tended to have imaginary friends that were less competent (Harter and Chao 1992).

Another study found that while the majority of both boys and girls had same-sex imaginary friends, more girls than boys had friends of the opposite gender, and boys had more nonhuman imaginary friends than girls did (Manosevitz, Prentice, and Wilson 1973).

Who are these imaginary playmates? Imaginary playmates are names or characters going around in the child’s world during that particular segment of his/her life. So don’t be astonished when your child announces that Shin-Chan is his best friend and plays with him having a complete conversation with him. Girls of this age tend to have interest in playing with their doll with which they converse like any normal person. These playmates are good friends to the child—non-threatening, warm, friendly, and always there for the child.

Children are more willing to listen and believe in fairy tales at this age. Their imagination is not questioned by the rational ideologies of the older world. They believe their imagination beyond their senses.

Imaginary playmates usually “appear” when the child is three or four and “disappear” by kindergarten when the child outgrows the need for them. There does not seem to be any precipitating factor or reason for their appearance.

So, what do parents do in such cases? These playmates are the product of a thoughtful brain, which can conceive the presence of a character, which in reality does not exist. These children are at the position in their life where they are learning to differentiate between the real world and the fantasy world.
A few things a parent should keep in mind:

- The friend belongs to your child; so don’t talk to it directly, just through your child.
- Don’t mention the friend until your child does.
- Don’t make fun of your child or make the child feel that there is something wrong with having an imaginary friend.
- Be especially careful not to talk about these cute, funny things your child says in the child’s hearing. The last thing we want children to feel is embarrassment about something they think or say.

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There can be instances where the child takes up these imaginary playmates as face-saving for the mistakes done by them. How to handle such situations? If your child asks for a chocolate for the imaginary friend divide one in half and ask to share it. If the child says that her friend dumped out the popcorn tell her to help clean it up. Don’t think that your child is lying when he or she blames the imaginary companion for some mistake. Don’t worry that your child will never develop a sense of responsibility or a conscience.

When a three-year-old says the imaginary friend did it, the child is well on the way to developing a conscience. Three-year-olds blame others precisely because they have learned that the behavior is wrong, which is what you want your child to learn. Blaming the imaginary friend gives children a chance to preserve their self-image while learning what acceptable behavior is.

An imaginary friend is a school of learning for a child. This is the time your child has selected to learn and live in the elder’s world. They start conversing, imagining and understanding the correctness of the true life.

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