



## Imaginary Friends

### Imaginary Friends

Many parents wonder about imaginary friends and whether they should worry. There is no harm in having an imaginary friend. In fact, research shows that having an imaginary friend is linked to being more creative later in life, as well as strong language skills and a good understanding of social interactions. Pretend play gives children an opportunity to explore things that can be complicated in a safe, imaginary environment.

### Imaginary friends are important.

- They are wonderful secret keepers. All children have secrets and want some privacy at times.
- They serve as buddies. Imaginary friends are great playmates.
- They are great for learning right from wrong. Your child can blame her misbehavior on her imaginary friend (for example, “I didn’t eat the ice cream mommy, Suzie did!”). Your child is beginning to distinguish between “right” and “wrong” but isn’t ready yet to assume full responsibility. It is easier for your child to blame his or her imaginary friend.
- Imaginary friends can help you see into your child’s internal, emotional world. You might even hear things you’ve said repeated in their imaginary play (for example, it’s ok Suzie, don’t be scared, I’m sure everybody will be very nice”).

### Tips for Parents:

- Treat your child’s imaginary friends with respect. If your child asks you to move out of the way to make room for their friend, do it if you can.
- Follow your child’s lead when joining in on their pretend play. Be careful not to take over or add too much. This is a chance for your child to make up stories and learn by exploring their own thoughts and feelings.
- If your child blames their imaginary friend for his misbehavior or mistake, use it as a teaching opportunity. For example, if your child’s imaginary superhero, Dynamo, spilled the water, you can say “That’s ok, mistakes happen, but let’s help Dynamo clean up the mess.”

### The Science:

Research shows that children can have imaginary friends for several years, even up to age 7. But don’t worry, as they grow and feel more comfortable in the world, your child will understand that imaginary friends are just pretend.