

Why Imaginary Friends Are Good for Kids

By Suzanne Bouffard

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You can't find Monkeytown on a GPS or in any book, but it is one of the most important places in our family.

Conveniently located between Tigertown, Giraffetown, and Framingham, Monkeytown is very much like any American town: it has schools, a fire department, swimming holes, and a professional baseball team. Its most important resident is Thelonious Monkey, a once-handsome but now balding guy who is dependable and kind.

Monkeytown is imaginary, of course, and Monkey is a stuffed animal with a shabby fur body and homemade overalls to cover up his many holes.

But in a very real way, Monkey was my son's best friend for many years. And he still feels like part of our family, thanks to the vivid stories we heard about him and his town. Truthfully, I can't imagine who any of us would be without him.

Studies show that as many as 50 percent of young children have an imaginary companion, whether completely pretend or in the form of a doll or stuffed animal like Monkey. Some children also develop complex imaginary worlds that psychologists call paracosms, though these are much less common.

Children with imaginary friends are [more likely to be firstborns or only children](#), but contrary to popular belief, they are not lonelier or shier than other children. In fact, they tend to be [creative and highly social](#). A study of highly accomplished and creative people who won so-called "genius" awards from the MacArthur Foundation found that more than a quarter of recipients had paracosms as children!

If your child has an imaginary friend or place, there's no need to worry, experts say. Psychologists believe that imaginary companions offer healthy opportunities for children to experience things they can't in real life – like going to the moon or being a bus driver-doctor like Monkey. Imaginary play offers a rare chance to be in complete control, something all children crave.

Even though your child may insist out loud that her imaginary friend is as real as you and me, most children do know the difference and will admit it if pressed. I once tried to convince my son to share a cookie with me, using the logic that he shared with Monkey. He looked at me with pity and said, "Mommy, Monkey doesn't have a real mouth." In general, it's best to play along, unless you feel the imaginary friend is making your child anxious or unhappy.

Imaginary friends can be a great comfort to your child – and also helpful to you. For example:

- **They can start conversations.** Even if your child doesn't want to talk about what she did at preschool today, she might want to tell you what her imaginary friend did, and you can get some clues. If you hear that Imaginary Maggie spilled all the paint, it doesn't

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mean your child spilled the paint, but it does give you a chance to say, “And what did *you* paint today?”

- **They can make transitions and difficult routines easier.** When my son was little, sometimes Monkey needed to hold the toothbrush to help him clean his teeth. And it helped to have Monkey talk through unfamiliar situations before they occurred. For example, before my son started preschool, we played school with Monkey to explain what it would be like. For weeks after the first day, I overheard my son playing teacher and explaining to Monkey, “Don’t worry! Mommies always come back.” This turned out to be a great coping strategy for his very normal anxieties.
- **They can give you a window into your child’s mind.** Imaginary friends can provide a good way for young children to talk about feelings they are otherwise not comfortable sharing. When I was pregnant with my second child, my son said he wasn’t nervous about having a baby brother . . . but Monkey definitely was! We all told Monkey about how he would be a big help, and we reassured him that we would always have time just for him.
- **They can inspire you to be creative.** Playing pretend with your child is a great way to bond and also help him develop his vocabulary, thinking skills, and creativity. If you feel shy or uncomfortable doing pretend play, your child’s imaginary companions might give you some ideas of scenarios or characters to use.

If your child has an imaginary friend or imaginary land, enjoy it. Let yourself be charmed by your child’s creativity and surprised how insightful she can be. Chances are good that imaginary friend won’t be around for long. As children transition out of early childhood, imaginary companions typically fade, becoming less important or even forgotten. [Pretend play continues to be important](#), especially for developing original thinking, but it may take different forms.

My now eight-year-old still uses Monkey as a comfort object, but his pretend scenarios are more focused on solving mysteries in the role of an [Odd Squad](#) agent. He doesn’t seem to miss the old Monkeytown adventures – but I certainly do.



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