

The Carter–Jenkins Center presents



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Psychoanalyst, Children, Adolescents and Adults



THE IMAGINARY COMPANIONS OF CHILDREN

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DEFINITION

- **Imaginary Companions refer to invisible characters, named and referred to in conversations with other persons or played with directly for a period of time, of at least several months. They have an air of reality for the child but no apparent objective basis. (Svendsen 1934)**

IMAGINARY COMPANION CHARACTERISTICS

- 1. They play a most active role in the household, tending to interfere a great deal with many of the everyday routines.**
- 2. Examples.**
- 3. Observed most frequently between ages of 2 1/2 - 10; majority in earlier range.**

Imaginary Companions Characteristics (cont)

- 4. Imaginary companion is a visual or auditory idea that becomes as real as visual or auditory perception.**
- 5. The child always recognizes its unreality.**
- 6. Hurlock and Burstein (1932) maintain that as many as 20% of all children have imaginary companions.**

Imaginary Companions Characteristics (cont)

- 7. Some children have only one imaginary companion, others have a great number of them simultaneously**
- 8. Imaginary companions are usually human beings, characters from stories, etc. In a few cases, they are elves and fairies or anthropomorphic animals.**

Imaginary Companions Characteristics (cont)

- 9. Most imaginary companions are children. Never seen a case in which a child's imaginary companion was an adult.**
- 10. They are the same age as the child or slightly younger.**

Imaginary Companions Characteristics (cont)

11. They possess many adult characteristics (strength, power, knowledge, authority, etc.)

12. More frequent in girls than boys. Majority of both boys & girls had companions of the same sex. (Jersild et al, 1933)

Imaginary Companions Characteristics (cont)

- 13. If IC not of same sex, girls IC are more frequently of the opposite sex than boys.**
- 14. Frequently they play a specific positive role in the development of the child.**

Imaginary Companions Characteristics (cont)

- 15. In some cases, the imaginary companions remain unobtrusive.**
- 16. They are a useful source of information about the inner difficulties, struggles, developmental stresses and conflicts of the child.**

Imaginary Companions Characteristics (cont)

- 17. Generally appear only in very intelligent children.**
- 18. Never observed in psychotic children.**
- 19. Better understood if we take into account the younger child's animistic conception of the world and his strong belief in magic and in the omnipotence of thoughts.**

Imaginary Companions Characteristics (cont)

- 20. The time at which imaginary companions disappear is generally difficult to obtain, which is due to the gradual character of the process (they kind of melt away).**

Functions of the Imaginary Companion

- 1. Imaginary companions serve a variety of “functions” depending upon the special needs of the child who creates them.**
- 2. They are observed in children who for a variety of reasons feel rejected.**

Functions of the Imaginary Companion (cont)

3. The imaginary companion can be used as a weapon for defiance and provocation.

4. Feelings of loneliness and neglect are, at times, at the roots of the creation of imaginary companions.

Functions of the Imaginary Companion (cont)

- 5. Imaginary companions are frequently seen immediately after the birth of a sibling.**
- 6. Some imaginary companions become superego auxiliaries.**

Functions of the Imaginary Companion (cont)

- 7. Such children “consult” their imaginary companions, who in turn instruct them to control their behavior in general or certain impulses in particular.**

Functions of the Imaginary Companion (cont)

- 8. At other times they are a vehicle for the discharge of impulses that are no longer acceptable to the child.**
- 9. They allow the child to justify his “naughty” behavior to himself or the parents.**
- 10. This is more frequent in the younger child, but even older children will occasionally try to justify some of their actions in this way.**

Functions of the Imaginary Companion (cont)

- 11. Helps to avoid criticism from the parents for misdeeds and unacceptable impulses.**
- 12. Helps to maintain self-love, self-esteem and feelings of self-worth.**

Functions of the Imaginary Companion (cont)

- 13. At times children address the imaginary companion as a naughty boy, as they are or were, addressed by their parents.**
- 14. It shows the emergence of a self-critical attitude and attempt to control his/her impulses.**

Functions of the Imaginary Companion (cont)

- 15. At times they are an impersonation of the child's primitive ego ideals. Ideals that may be beyond his reach.**
- 16. Thus, frequently imaginary companions are good, clever, strong, clean, non aggressive, lovable, etc.**

Functions of the Imaginary Companion (cont)

- 17. Imaginary companions act as a “developmental buffer,” mitigating for the child’s primitive ego what is at times an impossible situation that they really can not manage.**
- 18. It helps strike compromises making the situation more tolerable for the child’s helpless ego.**

Functions of the Imaginary Companion (cont)

- 19. That is so because many of the controls that we demand from the very young child are often beyond his/her limited capacities.**

- 20. They tend to restore transitorily the inner equilibrium before excessive stress forces a path into symptom formation, regression, or other disturbances.**

Functions of the Imaginary Companion (cont)

- 21. They prolong the feelings of omnipotence and control in the child.**
- 22. They are a necessary, intermediate step before they can transfer, at least in certain areas, control to their parents.**

Functions of the Imaginary Companion (cont)

- 23. Remember that the move from the child's belief in his own omnipotence to the belief in the parent's omnipotence is a slow, gradual, and difficult process.**
- 24. They disappear when the child finds suitable real companions.**
- 25. That is why they frequently vanish when the child goes to school.**

Other Views on Imaginary Companions

- **Bach in 1971 described two female adult patients who retained vivid memories of their childhood Imaginary Companions. The I C proved to be a focal point of problems in accepting their feminine identity. He had seen other cases where the I C were totally forgotten.**

Other Views on Imaginary Companions

- **Myers in 1979** tried to illustrate the thesis that the ability to create an “imaginary companion” in childhood is an early expression of the ego aptitudes found in creative individuals in adult life.
- **Benson and Pryor (1973)** attempted to explain why in the case of two children they observed their “imaginary companions” seem to have disappeared suddenly which is not the general course of events with I Cs.

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