

# IMAGINARY COMPANION

Authored by  
**mohammad looti**

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## IMAGINARY COMPANION

**Primary Disciplinary Field(s):** Developmental Psychology, Childhood Studies, Cognitive Science

### 1. Core Definition and Phenomenology

The term **Imaginary Companion (IC)**, often colloquially referred to as an **imaginary friend**, denotes a fictitious entity--which may take the form of a person, animal, or even a specific object--created and maintained by a child during early childhood. This psychological phenomenon is a highly visible and measurable expression of nascent **childhood fantasy** and the developing capacity for symbolic thought. Although the initial creation of an IC typically occurs between the ages of two and a half and four and a half, these companions frequently persist for several years, becoming integral parts of the child's daily interactions and emotional landscape. The defining characteristic is the child's treatment of the companion as genuinely real, possessing stable names, personalities, and specific behavioral traits. The interaction is sustained, involving verbal communication, shared play, and the attribution of complex psychological states to the non-existent entity.

A crucial aspect of the phenomenology of Imaginary Companions is the degree to which the child incorporates this fantasy figure into the real-world environment and insists on its recognition by others, particularly immediate family members. For instance, a child might demand that a specific seat remain vacant because "Bosko is there," requiring the whole family to acknowledge the companion's spatial and social existence. This requirement for social confirmation highlights the significance of the IC not merely as an internal thought process but as an externalized, dynamic participant in the child's perceived reality. Furthermore, researchers must often differentiate true Imaginary Companions--which possess stable, ongoing personalities--from transient fictional characters that a child invents solely for specific storytelling sessions or spontaneous daydreams. The stability and persistence of the personality are key metrics for classification within psychological studies.

### 2. Historical Studies and Prevalence Rates

Research into the prevalence and characteristics of Imaginary Companions dates back to early 20th-century psychological studies, establishing the phenomenon as a normal and widespread expression of development rather than an indicator of pathology. Classic investigations by researchers such as Hurlock and Burnstein (1932), Svendsen (1934), and Ames and Learned (1946) provided foundational data regarding the frequency of IC creation. These studies consistently indicated that a substantial portion of the pediatric population engages in this behavior, with estimated rates generally falling between 15 per cent and 30 per cent of children. This significant proportion underscores the idea that creating an IC is a normative, though not universal,

developmental milestone related to advanced cognitive abilities.

The historical data also identified slight demographic variations in IC creation. Specifically, early research suggested that girls exhibit a marginally higher frequency of creating imaginary companions compared to boys. While modern research often focuses less on these small gender disparities and more on cognitive correlates, these initial findings contributed to the understanding of fantasy play differences. The consistent prevalence across decades and diverse samples confirms that the capacity to create, sustain, and interact with a complex imaginary figure is fundamentally linked to the growth of self-awareness, social cognition, and the highly imaginative flexibility characteristic of the preschool years. Contrary to historical assumptions that might link ICs to social deficits, the research overwhelmingly supports the notion that they are a healthy and common element of early childhood psychological development.

### 3. Personality Correlates and Intellectual Capacity

A key finding regarding children who create Imaginary Companions is the wide array of personality types represented within this group, effectively dismantling earlier theories that restricted the phenomenon to specific, often negative, personality profiles. Studies consistently show that IC creators span the entire spectrum of psychological traits: they can be **shy** or **outgoing**, **aggressive** or **withdrawn**, and exhibit both **emotionally stable** and **emotionally unstable** temperaments. This wide distribution led researchers such as Ames and Learned to conclude definitively that imaginary companions are not exclusive to "timid or lonely children or in those exhibiting personality difficulties." Similarly, adults who later recall having had ICs during their youth display this same vast range of personality profiles, confirming the non-pathological nature of the behavior.

Perhaps the most salient psychological correlate identified in the literature is the link between **intellectual capacity** and the likelihood of creating an IC. Research indicates that brighter children are statistically more likely to construct imaginary companions than children categorized as duller. This correlation is generally attributed to the increased cognitive demands inherent in maintaining an elaborate, persistent fantasy world. Highly intelligent children possess the advanced executive function and memory skills necessary not only to invent an IC but also to construct far more intricate and sustained fantasies, such as developing an entire imaginary family unit that experiences various adventures over periods lasting weeks or months. Thus, the complexity and longevity of the fantasy often serve as a marker of advanced cognitive and imaginative processing.

### 4. Multifunctional Roles and Psychological Utility

Imaginary Companions are highly adaptive tools, serving a vast range of psychological and developmental purposes for the child. While some studies, notably Bender and Vogel (1941),

observed that ICs might appear somewhat more frequently when children are experiencing specific stressors--such as loneliness, sociability deficits, or difficulties with family relationships--it is important to recognize that these companions serve diverse, personalized needs across all children. In cases involving stress, the IC can provide **valuable clues** to the child's inner emotional needs, acting as a projection of their internal conflicts or desires.

The utility of the Imaginary Companion can be categorized into several key functions:

**Role Modeling and Aspiration:** The IC may embody qualities the child perceives as lacking in themselves, such as **courage**, strength, or "derring-do." By interacting with this courageous figure, the child symbolically internalizes those desired attributes.

**Emotional Regulation and Outlet:** ICs frequently function as a safe receptacle for strong or forbidden emotions. They provide an outlet for feelings of **anger**, **anxiety**, or even **guilt feelings** that the child may not yet possess the verbal skills or social permission to express directly to real people.

**Social Practice and Rehearsal:** The creation and maintenance of an IC allows the child to practice crucial **social roles and relationships** through dramatic make-believe. This is seen, for example, when little girls play nurse with their IC or little boys practice being bus drivers or policemen, thus rehearsing adult societal roles in a low-stakes environment.

**Intimate Friendship and Confidentiality:** For many children, the IC fulfills a profound need for **intimate friendship**. It provides a constant, non-judgmental confidante with whom they can share troubles, pleasures, secrets, and private thoughts, thereby meeting essential needs for connection and validation.

## 5. The Role of Scapegoating and Emotional Expression

One specific and highly interesting function of the Imaginary Companion is its utility as a **scapegoat** for unacceptable behaviors or lapses in judgment. Because the companion is not real and cannot be punished, the child can project responsibility for negative actions onto the fictional entity, thereby avoiding parental sanction or alleviating personal guilt. The famous declaration, "Bosko made me do it," exemplifies this mechanism. This scapegoating behavior is not indicative of malicious intent but rather represents a sophisticated cognitive strategy for managing the nascent understanding of rules, accountability, and transgression within the social world.

Furthermore, the IC facilitates the externalization of complex emotional narratives. The companion can be cast in roles that allow the child to explore themes of conflict, loss, and reconciliation without the emotional risk associated with real-life interactions. Through these projected scenarios, the child engages in a form of emotional processing and therapeutic play, working through anxieties and developing coping mechanisms that will be vital for future social adaptation. This capacity to use a fictional construct to manage real-world feelings highlights the **psychological**

**flexibility** conferred by imaginative play.

## 6. Resolution, Outgrowth, and Long-Term Significance

The phase of having an Imaginary Companion is typically temporary, concluding naturally as the child acquires greater **social skills**, becomes immersed in structured activities like school, and finds more direct and satisfying ways to meet their social and emotional needs through real peers. The companions rarely disappear suddenly; rather, they generally fade gradually as the child's focus shifts toward the demands and rewards of the external social environment. In some, rarer instances, the cessation of the IC relationship may be described by the child in a more dramatic or definitive fashion, perhaps meeting a "melodramatic end in an accident or an Indian war," reflecting the child's rich narrative capabilities even in concluding the fantasy.

Crucially, the disappearance of the imaginary companion does not signify a loss of imaginative capacity. The primary hope expressed by developmental psychologists is that while the specific need for the externalized friend diminishes, the underlying capacity to enjoy **fantasy**, utilize **imagination**, and engage in creative thought--skills honed through the IC experience--will persist and be integrated into the child's work, play, and eventual adult life. The Imaginary Companion, therefore, serves as a powerful transitional object, supporting the child through crucial developmental stages and ultimately strengthening their ability to navigate reality with creativity and emotional resilience.

## 7. Further Reading

[Imaginary Friend - Wikipedia](#)

[American Psychological Association: Developmental Psychology](#)

[The Nature and Function of Imaginary Companions: A Review](#)