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# Individual and Family Correlates of Imaginary Companions in Preschool Children<sup>1</sup>

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Factors associated with the presence or absence of imaginary companions in 222 preschool children were investigated using a self-administered questionnaire completed by their parents. Section I of the Imaginary Companion Questionnaire was designed to elicit a variety of demographic data on the children and their families and was completed by all parents. Section II was devised to obtain data concerning the imaginary companion itself and was completed only by parents of those children ( $N = 63$ ) who currently or in the recent past had imaginary companions. Data on family structure, play activities, and personality characteristics of the children, as well as characteristics of their imaginary companions, were presented. Data from the present study indicate that reducing loneliness is one of the multiple functions served by imaginary companions.

An intrinsically appealing form of childhood fantasy is the imaginary companion. As defined by Svendsen (1934) the imaginary companion is

an invisible character, named and referred to in conversation with other persons or played with directly for a period of time, at least several months, having an air of reality for the child but no apparent objective basis. This excludes that type of imaginative play in which an object is personified, or in which the child himself assumes the role of some person in his environment [p. 988].

A variety of explanations have been proposed to account for this phenomenon. According to Nagera (1969), the imaginary companion may serve a variety of dynamic functions for the preschool child. In some cases this may be as a superego auxiliary in which the companion serves to instruct or to control the impulses or behaviors of the young child. In other cases the imaginary

companion may be a vehicle for the discharge of naughty or forbidden behaviors for the child who has internalized parental prohibitions or fears parental criticism. In other instances feelings of loneliness or neglect may motivate children to create these fantasy companions. In such circumstances the companion may disappear as the child enters school and develops real friendships. At other times, imaginary companions may develop for a short period of time to assist the child in compensating for frustrating or difficult aspects of the child's external reality.

The relatively sparse psychoanalytic writings on this topic have tended to stress the intrapsychic basis for imaginary companions while the child development literature has treated the phenomenon more as an interesting developmental event representing merely a substitute companion for the lonely child during his early socialization. The psychoanalytic tradition of exhaustive analysis of single clinical cases with imaginary companions may have contributed to the frequent association of imaginary companion phenomena with psychopathology. Contrariwise, with its traditional focus on normative development and external reality, child developmentalists have ordinarily neglected the complex motivational bases for such a phenomenon and emphasized its essential normality.

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Although estimates of the frequency of imaginary companions vary widely from as low as 12% to 33% or higher depending on the sample studied, the inclusiveness of the definition of the phenomenon, data collection methods (questionnaire, observation, or interview), and age of subjects when evaluated, there is relatively little empirical data on imaginary companions.<sup>3</sup> While the object of considerable attention by parents, writers, and poets (Bender & Vogel, 1941), and to a lesser extent by child psychologists (Breckenridge & Vincent, 1960; Hurlock, 1968; Jersild, 1968; Stone & Church, 1968), in recent years relatively little systematic research has been undertaken on imaginary companions. Adopting the criteria of uniform data collection procedures, use of control children without imaginary companions, and samples of reasonable size, only six systematic studies have been identified (Ames & Learned, 1946; Griffiths, 1935; Hurlock & Burstein, 1932; Jersild, Markey, & Jersild, 1933; Schaefer, 1969; Svendsen, 1934). In two of these studies, questionnaire data were collected from high school students (Hurlock & Burstein, 1932; Schaefer, 1969), while three used predominantly preschool age children, interviewed the children, and used other data sources such as parent interviews, school records, and observations (Griffiths, 1935; Jersild et al., 1933; Svendsen, 1934). In the Ames and Learned (1946) study a combination of nursery school children and clinical cases were investigated.

The absence of uniform data gathering has led to many inconsistencies in findings as well as in interpretations of results in the imaginary companion literature. In the present study, the use of a uniform questionnaire with a reasonably large sample of normal preschool children was expected to provide more unambiguous evidence on the familial and individual factors associated with this phenomenon.

### Method

#### Subjects

Preschool children were selected for study since imaginary companions are most commonly re-

ported in this age group (Breckenridge & Vincent, 1960; Jersild, 1968; Nagera, 1969; Stone & Church, 1968). The Imaginary Companion Questionnaire was distributed to the parents of 461 preschoolers; completed questionnaires were returned by 228 (49.4%). In most cases the questionnaire was completed by the mother, although in some cases the father assisted. All of the children were enrolled in nine nursery schools and day care centers in a medium-sized southwestern city.<sup>4</sup> The student enrollment of the preschools<sup>5</sup> ranged in size from 24 to 107 children and represented a wide geographic area of the city. Parents who had a child between 3 and 5 years of age in one of the preschools received the questionnaire. Initial personal visits to the nine preschools were made in order to enlist cooperation. Mailing lists of all children between the ages of 3 and 5 years at the time they enrolled were obtained from the directors of all but two of the preschools. Imaginary Companion Questionnaires<sup>6</sup> were coded and mailed to the parents. A follow-up letter sent after 10 days to those parents who had not returned a completed questionnaire resulted in return rates of 37% to 79% for seven preschools. In the two preschools where mailing lists could not be obtained, the questionnaires were coded, delivered to the preschools, and distributed by the staff to the parents of all children between the ages of 3 and 5. For these two preschools the rate of return was 32% and 36%.

A total of 222 children,<sup>7</sup> 110 boys ( $M = 58.5$  months,  $SD = 10.6$ ) and 112 girls ( $M = 54.6$  months,  $SD = 10.2$ ) were studied. In the combined sample, 63 (28%) of the boys and girls were reported by their parents as having had one or more imaginary companions, while 159 (72%) were reported as never having had an imaginary companion. All differences between the imaginary

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<sup>5</sup> For terminological ease, both nursery schools and day care centers will be referred to as preschools in this article.

<sup>6</sup> A copy of the Imaginary Companion Questionnaire can be obtained by writing the first author.

<sup>7</sup> Data from six questionnaires were omitted from the study because ambiguity in parents' description prevented proper categorization.

<sup>3</sup> Summaries of the imaginary companion literature can be found in Ames and Learned (1946), Jersild (1968), and Nagera (1969).

and nonimaginary companion groups were analyzed for sex differences.

In the imaginary companion group, 51% of the subjects were boys ( $M = 56.5$  months,  $SD = 11.0$  for all subjects). Socioeconomic status was scored for each family using Hollingshead's (1957) two-factor index of social position. The percentage of subjects' families in each social class was Class I, 51; Class II, 23; Class III, 15; Class IV, 11; Class V, 0. In the nonimaginary companion group, 49% of the subjects were boys ( $M = 56.5$  months,  $SD = 10.5$  for all subjects). The percentage of subjects' families in each social class was Class I, 51; Class II, 22; Class III, 18; Class IV, 7; and Class V, 1. Thus, the sample obtained for this study is clearly weighted in the direction of higher socioeconomic status. Differences in responses due to social class were analyzed by comparing responses from subjects in Social Class I with responses from subjects in Social Classes II-V. Only one significant difference due to social class emerged and it is described in the Results section. Data on prior clinical contact were available for 61 children in the imaginary companion group and 99 in the nonimaginary companion group. The parents of these children reported that only 2 in each group had received some type of psychological counseling or treatment. Therefore, as intended, the subjects represented a nonclinical population almost without exception.

### Questionnaire

The Imaginary Companion Questionnaire was designed to provide specific data about the home setting and the play activities of the children. In Part I questions covered the following topics: (a) nuclear family composition and parental occupation and education; (b) sex, number, and ages of playmates; (c) toys owned, play difficulties, play activities engaged in by child with family members, and play patterns with other children; (d) parents' perception of the child's ability to interact with children and adults; (e) behavioral or emotional problems of the child; and (f) psychological counseling or treatment experiences.

The parents were instructed that for the purpose of the research, an imaginary companion was defined as a very vivid imaginary character (person, animal, or object) with which their child interacts during his play and daily activities. Using this definition, most parents were able to exclude nightmare and daydream characters and to clearly determine whether or not their child had an imaginary companion. Those parents whose child had an imaginary companion completed Part II of the questionnaire which elicited information covering the following: (a) number of imaginary companions; (b) age of the child when the imaginary companion first appeared and how it disappeared if no longer present; (c) child's relationship to his imaginary companion; (d) activities which the imaginary companion engaged in; (e) parental attitudes and treatment of the child and his imaginary companion; (f) names of the imaginary companion

and possible sources for these names; (g) extent imaginary companion is or was preferred over real playmates; (h) sex and age of the imaginary companion (relative to the child); and (i) length of time the child had imaginary companion.

Identical questionnaires were mailed to all parents, with the exception of one preschool in which a shorter form of the questionnaire was mailed. The questionnaire for this preschool consisted mostly of questions about imaginary companions since the demographic information was obtained from the school records. A cover letter briefly explaining the research accompanied each questionnaire. All parents were asked to complete and return the questionnaire whether or not their child had an imaginary companion. The cover letter explained that the research project had been reviewed and endorsed by the director of the preschool who encouraged their participation. In an attempt to alleviate any stigma which parents might attach to disclosing that their child had an imaginary companion, the letter further explained that the study was concerned with normal children and, moreover, that the presence of an imaginary companion was not indicative of an emotional disturbance or a behavior problem. Parents were assured that their responses would remain anonymous.

## Results

### Family Structure

In the imaginary companion group 17.5% of the children came from homes where the biological parents were divorced, divorced and remarried, separated, or deceased. This was also true for 14.5% of the children who did not have an imaginary companion. This difference was not significant, and there were no significant differences in the frequency of divorce or separation between the two groups of parents. Thus, it does not appear that nuclear family disruption is a factor contributing to the presence of imaginary companions.

One-third of the children in the imaginary companion group were only children and 40% were firstborns. In the nonimaginary companion group, 26% of the children were only children and 23% were firstborns. The difference between the two groups with respect to frequency of only children was not significant; however, the difference between the two groups in frequency of firstborn children was ( $z = 2.56, p < .025$ ).

There was no significant difference between the two groups of firstborn children in the mean age of the next oldest sibling. For firstborn subjects for whom it could be de-

terminated ( $N = 11$ ), the imaginary companion disappeared, on the average, about 2½ months after the birth of the next sibling.

Excluding one-child families, the mean number of siblings in each group was computed. The difference between the two groups in the average number of siblings in each group was not significant (imaginary companion,  $M = 1.3$ ,  $SD = .1$ ; nonimaginary companion,  $M = 1.5$ ,  $SD = .1$ ). However, imaginary companion subjects had, on the average, younger siblings than nonimaginary companion subjects (imaginary companion,  $M = 72.0$  months,  $SD = 63.1$ ; nonimaginary companion,  $M = 94.5$  months,  $SD = 64.9$ ;  $t = 2.30$ ,  $df = 230$ ,  $p < .025$ ).

#### *Playmates and Pets*

Additional analyses of other household members, number, age, and number of male and female playmates, and the number of hours spent with playmates, as well as the number of pets in the household, revealed no significant differences between those children having and those children not having an imaginary companion. Apparently these factors are not significant determinants of the presence of imaginary companions.

#### *Play Activities*

Parents were asked to check yes or no to seven adjectives that described their children's play at home. It was found that 97% of the children who had imaginary companions were described as those whose home play was self-initiated, while 86% of the play of children who did not have imaginary companions was described in this way ( $z = 2.17$ ,  $p < .05$ ). Play in the home of the children who had imaginary companions was described as "quiet" for only 18% of these children and for 34% of the nonimaginary companion children ( $z = 2.34$ ,  $p < .05$ ). These differences in self-initiation and quiet play suggest that the child who has an imaginary companion may be more able to engross himself in play activities. This may in turn be due to greater creative or innovative abilities. There were no significant differences between the two groups, as reported by parents, in how well their child gets along with other children. Both groups play often and well with other

children and do not have frequent fights or disagreements with their playmates. As expected, parents reported that boys (imaginary and nonimaginary companion groups combined) have more fights than girls ( $\chi^2 = 4.80$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $p < .05$ ). Children in Social Class I, when compared with those in Social Classes II-V, were reported by their parents as more frequently unable to play well and often with other children ( $\chi^2 = 4.20$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $p < .05$ ).

No significant difference was revealed between the two groups in the number of hours spent per day with the mother or with the father. Parents were asked to list the activities jointly engaged in by the child and other members of the family. These data revealed that the children who had imaginary companions engaged in significantly more different activities with members of the household (imaginary companion,  $M = 5.2$ ,  $SD = 1.1$ ; nonimaginary companion,  $M = 4.1$ ,  $SD = 2.1$ ;  $t = 3.53$ ,  $df = 202$ ,  $p < .001$ ).

#### *Personality Characteristics*

Parents were asked to rate their child on two dimensions using a 7-point scale. The first dimension was anchored at one end by "shy and reserved" and at the other end by "open and outgoing." Both groups of parents rated their child as more open and outgoing than average, and there was no significant difference between groups. The second scale was anchored at one end by "very adept at talking and interacting with adults," and at the other end by "talks and interacts much easier with children than adults." Both groups of children were rated by their parents as being adept at talking and interacting with adults. However, the parents of children who had imaginary companions rated their children as being significantly more capable of this type of interaction than parents of children who did not (imaginary companion,  $M = 2.2$ ,  $SD = 1.3$ ; nonimaginary companion,  $M = 2.7$ ,  $SD = 1.4$ ;  $t = 2.65$ ,  $df = 218$ ,  $p < .01$ ). However, further analysis of this finding, by sex of child, indicated that it is due to the fact that males who had imaginary companions were significantly more adept at interacting with adults than males who did not have an

imaginary companion (imaginary companion males,  $M = 1.8$ ,  $SD = 1.1$ ; nonimaginary companion males,  $M = 2.8$ ,  $SD = 1.5$ ;  $t = 3.67$ ,  $df = 107$ ,  $p < .01$ ). For females, the means for the imaginary companion group ( $M = 2.6$ ) was almost identical to the mean of the nonimaginary companion group ( $M = 2.7$ ).

### *Behavior Problems*

Each questionnaire included a checklist of behavior problems, defined as "problems in your child that are giving concern at present or have given concern in the past." Among the 22 problems listed were: restlessness, masturbation, jealousy, thumb sucking, fearfulness, hair pulling, attention seeking, and so forth. Although there was a difference in the mean number of problems reported by the parents of the two groups (imaginary companion,  $M = 4.4$ ,  $SD = 2.9$ ; nonimaginary companion,  $M = 3.9$ ,  $SD = 3.0$ ), it was not statistically significant. In addition, there were no significant group differences in the types of problems reported.

### *Descriptive Data on Imaginary Companions*

The results indicate that females had significantly more imaginary companions than males (males,  $M = 1.5$ ,  $SD = .9$ ; females,  $M = 2.2$ ,  $SD = 1.4$ ;  $t = 2.16$ ,  $df = 54$ ,  $p < .05$ ). Imaginary companions appeared in a majority of cases (61%) at a time when the child had no siblings. In the vast majority of cases (89%) the imaginary companion was a person, and in 59% of the cases the imaginary companion was a male. Males were more likely to have a male imaginary companion, but females showed only a slight tendency to have same-sex imaginary companions ( $\chi^2 = 7.01$ ,  $df = 1$ ,  $p < .01$ ). For males the same-sex imaginary companion ratio was 3.5 to 1, while for females it was 1.3 to 1. This difference, among preschool children, may reflect parental demands for stricter compliance to sex-role stereotypes in males in contrast to their greater tolerance of cross-sex preferences and behavior in females. Approximately one-half (57%) of the children had only one imaginary companion, and about one-quarter (23%) had two imaginary companions. The age of the imaginary companion was unknown in 44%, the same

age as the child in 32%, and older than the child in 24% of the cases.

The attitudes of the parents toward their child's imaginary companion were described as "good for the child" by 62%, and as "having no effect" on the child by 42%, although 4% of the parents felt the imaginary companion had a "harmful effect" on the child (see Table 1). Parents encouraged the imaginary companion in 50% of the cases, ignored it in 43% of the cases, while only 7% discouraged the child's imaginary companion.

About half of the names used by children for their imaginary companions were common names. Approximately half of these were those of a friend, about one-fifth came from television, and the remainder were selected from books, games, toys, or relatives in about equal frequencies. Almost all (93%) of the children preferred not to interact with their imaginary companion when other children were available, and most stopped playing with their imaginary companions when other children came to play. Additional descriptive data obtained from the parents whose child had one or more imaginary companions are summarized in Table 1.

### **Discussion**

One of the many crucial components in socialization and personality development is social interaction with siblings and peers. In the absence of such interaction, as in the case of the firstborn or only child who does not have playmates and may generally live in an adult-oriented milieu, social interaction with age-mates may be greatly reduced. Some of the necessary developmental experiences can be provided through the vehicle of an imaginary companion. With this companion the child can practice and develop social and language skills which might otherwise develop more slowly.

The significant differences in frequency of firstborns in the two groups, the observation that 73% of the imaginary companion subjects and only 49% of the nonimaginary companion subjects were only and firstborn children, and the fact that 61% of the imaginary companion subjects had no siblings at the time the imaginary companion appeared

TABLE 1

SUMMARY OF QUESTIONNAIRE DATA FROM PARENTS WHOSE CHILD HAD ONE OR MORE IMAGINARY COMPANIONS

Question	% in response category
Frequency of appearance of imaginary companion ( $N = 61$ )	
Response	
Steady companion, appears almost every day	23
Appears frequently but not every day	57
Appeared only once or twice	20
Mood of child when talking or playing with imaginary companion ( $N = 60$ )	
Response	
Happy and in high spirits	62*
Quiet and reserved	12
Lonely	20
Angry	8
No specific mood	42
Nature of relationship between imaginary companion and child ( $N = 59$ )	
Response	
Usually play peacefully together	81
Sometimes have arguments and disagreements	24
At times child consults or asks permission of the imaginary companion before doing something	37
At times the imaginary companion asks permission of the child to do something	29
Child uses his imaginary companion to escape blame or punishment	27
Place and activities that imaginary companion usually accompanies the child ( $N = 58$ )	
Response	
Outside	57
In home	83
Driving in car	46
While eating	24
While shopping	21
To and at preschool	16
To bed	33
While watching television	22
Talks on telephone to imaginary companion	28
Physical space imaginary companion occupies ( $N = 60$ )	
Response	
Needs its own chair at the table	18
Needs room in the car	12
Needs place in the child's bed	8
Needs space of its own, various places other than those specified above	23
Does not need any space of its own	53
Parental behavior that prompted appearance of imaginary companion ( $N = 58$ )	
Response	
Punishment or scolding	17
Requiring child to play indoors or in his room	19
Parent not able to attend to or play with child at particular moment	33
Questioning child about or expressing interest in imaginary companion	39
Other	10
Disappearance of imaginary companion ( $N = 63$ )	
Response	
Disappeared by the time the questionnaire had been filled out	57
Time when imaginary companion disappeared ( $N = 34$ )	
Response	
Disappeared around the time child started preschool	32
Reasons for disappearance ( $N = 36$ )	
Response	
Imaginary companion left suddenly without explanation	47
Child gradually stopped playing and talking with imaginary companion	50
Other	3

Note.  $N$  = the number of parents responding to the item.

\* When a child had more than one imaginary companion some parents reported data for more than one imaginary companion, and in some cases more than one response category was appropriate for a single imaginary companion; thus the total is greater than 100%.

all implicate family structure as an important factor in determining imaginary companion phenomena. There was no difference between the two groups in the number of siblings in their families, although the siblings of the imaginary companion subjects were significantly younger. This suggests that the difference of the siblings' age vis-à-vis the subjects' age is the important factor. These data are consistent with those reported by Ames and Learned (1946) and by Svendsen (1934), but not with those reported by Hurlock and Burstein (1932). However, in the latter study the data were obtained through questionnaires from secondary school students who may be less reliable informants than parents in the recall of early family history.

Collectively the data from the present study and those of Svendsen and Ames and Learned suggest that one of the functions of the imaginary companion is to partially alleviate the loneliness of a child who has no siblings and generally lives in an adult-oriented social milieu during a crucial period of childhood socialization and language development. One implication of this suggestion is that the child who develops such an imaginary companion may be more of a self-starter or self-initiator of activities. Data obtained in this study support such an interpretation. The play of imaginary companion children was more self-initiated, and a greater number of different play activities were engaged in with family members. This interpretation is consistent with that reached by Ames and Learned (1946). Clearly imaginary companions can serve multiple functions, and future research is needed to identify these with greater precision. The data from the present study and some previous studies support the suggestion that the amelioration of loneliness is one of these functions and perhaps a more basic one in normal children. However, in cases of childhood psychopathology, imaginary companions may serve functions other than those manifested in the nonclinical sample of this study.

One should be aware in assessing the findings of the present study that they may be subject to the usual methodological shortcomings of questionnaire data. In addition,

there is the possibility of special sources of distortion in the data because the parents are reporting their perceptions of their own child. Moreover, the children in the imaginary companion group were more frequently firstborns. This may have reflected not only the greater likelihood for such phenomena to be associated with this ordinal position, but also the common observation that mothers are frequently able to describe the development of their firstborns in far more detail than their subsequent children.

The high proportion of Class I socioeconomic status in both the imaginary and nonimaginary companion groups suggests that the results may have been partly influenced by this factor. Thus, until data from more socioeconomically heterogeneous samples are available, the results of this study should be generalized to middle- and lower-class children with caution.

Future studies should exploit sources of data in addition to parental reports such as observations of the child, teacher ratings, interviews of children and parents, personality tests, and laboratory tasks to assess specific cognitive skills and personality dispositions of the child as related to imaginary companion phenomena. Future research should also concentrate on determining what parental child-rearing techniques and attitudes promote imaginary companion phenomena as well as the long-range impact of such phenomena on the child's later development. The paucity of research on imaginary companion phenomena is surprising since quite conceivably imaginary companions in childhood may be linked to subsequent personality dispositions and abilities such as independence, sociability, creativity, delay of gratification, role taking, and fantasy. In one of the rare studies bearing on this issue, Schaefer (1969) in a study of 800 adolescent boys and girls reported that highly creative and artistic boys (as measured by art and writing) and highly creative girls (as measured by writing only) reported a significantly higher incidence of imaginary companions in childhood.

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