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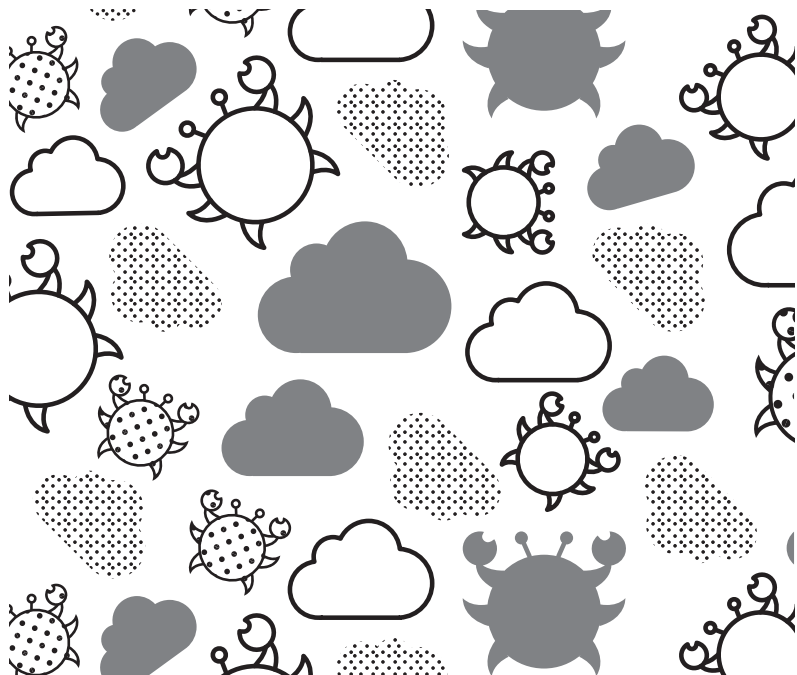
**KEY THEMES AND  
CURRENT ISSUES**

in Psychology

## **How imaginary friends could boost children's development**

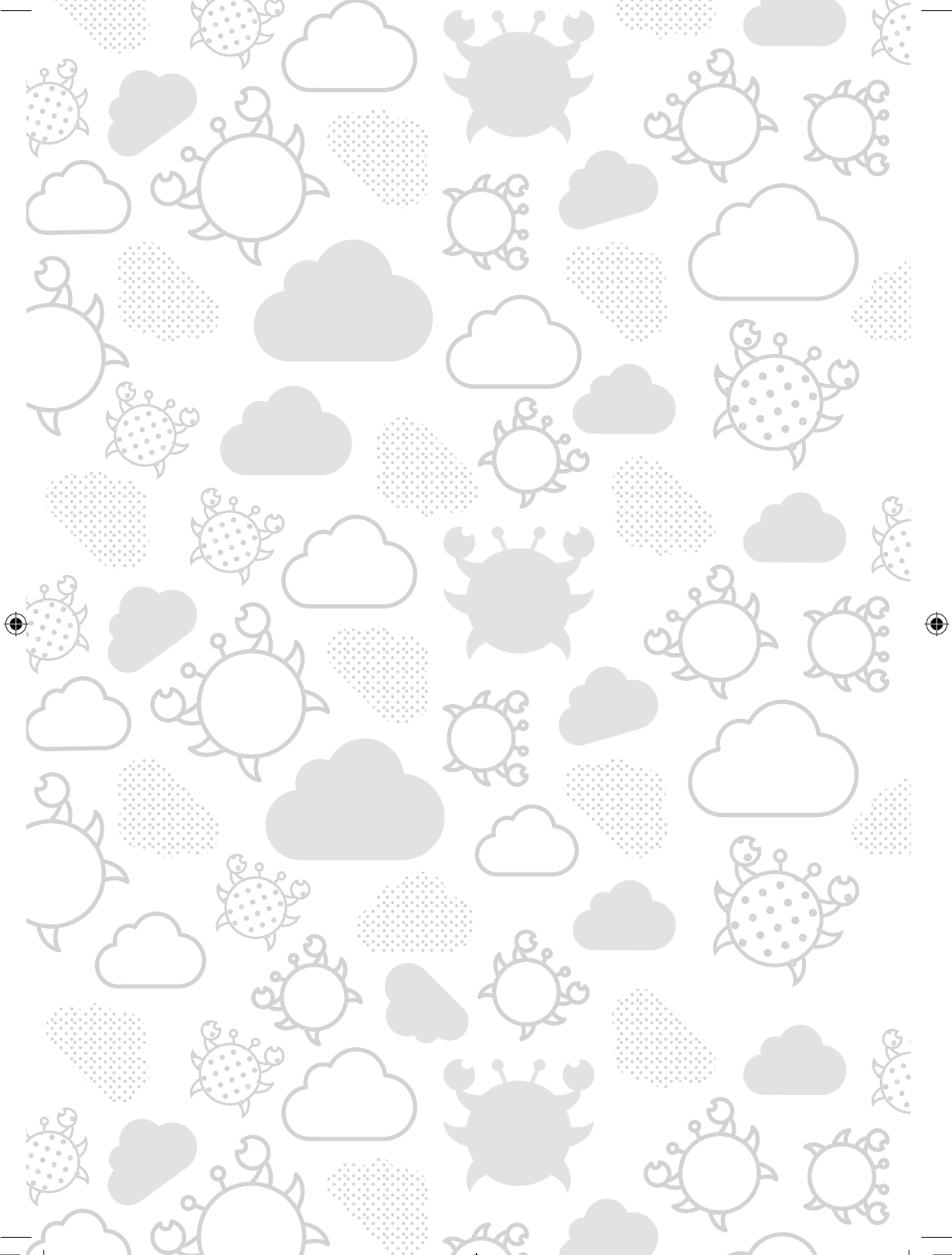
### **How imaginary friends from our childhood can continue to affect us as adults**

Dr Paige Davis



**ISSUE 2**





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# How imaginary friends could boost children's development

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Psychologists first became interested in imaginary friends in the early 19th century because they feared they could be a sign of emotional instability or psychological problems in children. But as scientists have learned more about these invisible playmates over the last two decades, it has become increasingly clear that they are actually quite the opposite – a sign of positive developmental progress.

Imaginary friends among children is surprisingly common. Most people either know someone who had an imaginary playmate as a child, or had one themselves. Some studies have found that as many 65% of children play with invisible companions.

Children typically start inventing imaginary friends between the ages of three and five. And they have been reported in children around the world from English speaking cultures, to Kenya, Japan and Nepal. And not just typically developing children have them, those with Down Syndrome and children diagnosed with autism also enjoy playing with fantasy friends.

Children make up imaginary friends for many different reasons, and each fantasy friend is unique and special to their creator. But a common reason is simply to relieve loneliness. If you think up an imaginary person, you have someone to play with at all times. This is one reason why children who are first born or only children – who don't have siblings – are more likely to play with imaginary friends.



Another common reason for creating a fantasy friend is having someone to blame for bad behaviour or mischief. Imaginary friends are often the reason for broken windows or untidy rooms according to their child creators.

## Benefits of fantasy friends

Research has found that youngsters who make fantasy friends are more socially aware than children who do not have an imaginary playmate. For example, children with imaginary friends can put themselves in other people's shoes better than peers who have not made an imaginary friend. This means that they can think about how other people might see things differently than they do, and this could help them in social situations.

Other studies have found that children with imaginary friends focus more on the minds of others than their looks. For example, research has shown that these children tend to talk more about personalities than visual clues when describing real friends. They have also been shown to [have a better understanding of themselves] and that the fact that their thoughts cannot leak out of their minds – something that children tend to find difficult to understand.

Some studies have found that children with imaginary friends are also more creative than others. With all these benefits though, it is currently hard to tell exactly whether imaginary friends actually cause them or whether children who are just generally more creative and socially aware are more likely to have such friends. That said, it does seem likely that playing with an imaginary friend over time will further boost a child's social abilities, even if they are good to begin with.



These are all findings that point to positive social and emotional developments that serve an important purpose in childhood. As we grow older, we typically have more freedom to make new friends and spend less time alone. We also understand the social world a lot better. However, while most children therefore stop playing with imaginary friends after a few years, some continue to spend time with them. And researchers have discovered that the positive qualities of having imaginary friends in childhood continue through development. Adolescents with problem behaviours who have imaginary friends have been found to have more positive adjustment and coping skills than those without.

Adults can also have imaginary friends, though it is rare. Some even argue that authors have imaginary friends in their characters, because they do things authors didn't expect when writing and which help to create the character's own stories.

## The role of parents

Parents often wonder how they should approach their children's imaginary friend. The evidence suggests that the best thing to do is to accept the imaginary playmate and join in with the child.

For example, if your child is playing with the friend before dinnertime, you might suggest setting the table for the friend as well. Parents of children with imaginary friends are actually better at describing their children's play than those parents of children who do not have them, suggesting that they might be more in tune with their children's behaviour.



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It is not uncommon to have an imaginary friend who doesn't play nicely. For example, some imaginary friends will not share toys or do what the child asks, while others might say mean things to the child. In these cases, it might be helpful for the parent to listen to what the child is saying about the friend and troubleshoot the problem together with the child. Although these friends may not seem positive, they are actually helping the child understand their social world in the same way as the imaginary friends that play nicely.

Of course there are rare occasions when parents should worry about imaginary playmates, such as when the child thinks their friend is actually real. Most children with imaginary friends understand the difference between their own fantasy and reality. So in the vast majority of cases, invisible friends are just another example of children's amazing imaginative abilities – and one that may actually benefit them.

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## How imaginary friends from our childhood can continue to affect us as adults

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Crabby crab is my four-year-old son Fisher's imaginary friend. Crabby appeared on a holiday in Norway by scuttling out of his ear after a night of tears from an earache. Like other childhood imaginary friends, Crabby should be an indication that Fisher's mind is growing and developing positively. Indeed, research shows that invisible companions can help boost children's social skills.

But what happens when children grow up and their imaginary friends disappear? Will Crabby have influenced Fisher into adolescence or adulthood? And what if you continue to have imaginary friends as an adult? The vast majority of the research on imaginary friends looks at young children as this is the time when these playmates are most likely to appear. But researchers have started looking into the impact of imaginary childhood friends in adolescence and adulthood.

Imaginary friends in childhood are classified as invisible beings that a child gives a mind or personality to and plays with for over three months.

It is very rare that adults have imaginary companions. But there are a few different types of behaviour that could be considered a form of imaginary friendship. For example, adult authors can be seen as prolific creators of imaginary friends in the form of characters. That's because their characters have personalities and minds of their own, and authors often report their characters leading the writing rather than vice versa. Tulpas, objects created through spiritual or mental powers in mysticism, are also a sort of imaginary friend.



## Social skills in adolescence

Research has shown that the positive effects of having imaginary friends as a child continue into adulthood. Adolescents who remember their imaginary playmates have been found to use more active coping styles, such as seeking advice from loved ones rather than bottling things up inside, like their peers. Even adolescents with behavioural problems who had imaginary friends as children have been found to have better coping skills and more positive adjustment through the teenage years.

Scientists think this could be because these teens have been able to supplement their social world with imagination rather than choosing to be involved in relationships with more difficult classmates. It could also be because the imaginary friends help to alleviate these adolescents' loneliness.

These teens are also more likely to seek out social connections. Some older research suggests that such adolescents have higher levels of psychological distress than their peers who do not remember having imaginary playmates. But the majority of research being done points to mainly positive outcomes. Current research being done now by my student, Tori Watson, is taking this evidence and looking at how adolescents who report having imaginary friends as children deal with bullying at school. We suspect that teens who remember their imaginary friends will be better at dealing with bullying.

## Creativity and hallucinations

Adults who had imaginary friends, meanwhile, report that they are more creative and imaginative than those who did not. We also know that they are better at describing a scene that they have constructed in their imagination. This could be because they were more imaginative to start with and/or that playing with an imaginary friend in childhood helped boost such capabilities.

There are also other discrepancies in how adults see and interact with the world around them that scientists think stems from the use of imagination when playing with an invisible friend as a child. For example, adults who had imaginary friends talk to





themselves more. This is thought to be because they have grown up being more comfortable talking when no one else real is around. Interestingly, research has shown that talking to yourself can be a sign of high cognitive functioning and creativity.

Adults who had imaginary companions as children may become used to seeing things that aren't really there and explaining them to people. For this reason, imaginary friends have been looked at as a type of hallucination that is experienced by normally developing children. Importantly, the children know that these friends aren't actually real. Adults similarly can have hallucination experiences when going in or coming out of a deep sleep. We sometimes also see or hear things that aren't there, for example in the corner of our eye – knowing it's our mind playing tricks on us.

My team and I recently investigated whether people who had imaginary friends as children also report more such hallucination experiences. Interestingly, our study, published in *Psychiatry Research*, found that this actually is the case. Importantly, these individuals were not a greater risk of developing psychosis or schizophrenia, they were just more likely to have common forms of hallucinations. We know that because we also tested other perceptual experiences like unusual thoughts and ideas as well as symptoms of depression. These experiences, in combination with more intense hallucinations, can put people at higher risk of developing schizophrenia. But people who had had imaginary friends didn't show this combination of symptoms. There was one exception, though – individuals who had also suffered child abuse. These people were more likely to have both unusual thoughts and ideas, and depression, possibly making them more vulnerable to psychosis. It's unclear whether this link has got anything to do with imaginary friends or whether it is all down to the trauma of having suffered child abuse, with imaginary friends instead playing a comforting role.

So while we know a lot about childhood imaginary friends such as Crabby Crab, and the positive effects they can have, there is still a lot to learn about imaginary friends and how our childhood experiences with them might make us see the world differently.



## Dr Paige Davis

A lecturer in Psychology at York St John University, Paige's teaching area of expertise is in Developmental Psychopathology and Developmental Psychology. Paige teaches 'Foundations of Human Development' for first-year students, 'Psychology in Education', 'Developmental Psychopathology and Clinical Applications' and supervises on the 'Dissertation' module for third-year students. Paige also teaches 'Psychological Research Methods' and 'Child Development' modules for Postgraduate students.

Paige is a Vygotskian and a Developmental Psychologist. Her main research interests are socio-cognitive development and imagination, specifically imaginary companions (ICs); investigating ICs created by children with Autism. Paige is also looking at adult trajectories after having an IC, researching ICs in adults in terms of hallucination like experiences, and how having an IC in childhood may relate to hallucination experiences. Other interests include the development of audio verbal hallucination and early development of language.

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The first article was originally published on 12 December 2018 and the second article was originally published on 8 March 2019, both in 'The Conversation': [www.theconversation.com](http://www.theconversation.com)

To hear Paige talk about her recent research, you can visit the BBC sounds Website and listen to Paige's 5 Live Morning show interview.



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