

# imaginary friends revealed

Myths busted! Here are the real reasons why kids (like Calista) create imaginary friends (like Sally, who seriously loves salad). **BY RACHEL SIMPSON**



**Four-year-old Lola** could talk about her two imaginary friends, Mimi and Loggy, all the livelong day: their likes and dislikes, their firm ideas on decor, hairstyles, cuisine, hobbies. These friends are “tall as a basket,” Lola proclaims, and their favorite color is “currant.” (Has someone been skimming the J. Crew catalog?)

After two years of this, her mom, Sarah, is pretty familiar with the database. “A lot of our life revolves around Lola telling stories about Mimi and Loggy and what they are doing,” she explains. Sarah’s got a theory about Mimi and Loggy’s arrival. She believes they showed up during the family’s move from New England to Minnesota, when Lola, then 2, was missing her left-behind friends and badly needing new ones.

Most parents, like Sarah, have theories about why their children concoct pretend playmates. It’s a transitional thing, or they’re bored or lonely. Yet a recent study by psychology professor Marjorie Taylor, of the University of Oregon, has debunked the conventional wisdom, including the idea that the presence of an imaginary friend indicates the absence of something else in a child’s life.

When it comes to imaginary friends, Taylor, author of *Imaginary Companions and the Children Who Create Them*, is “one of the world’s foremost authorities,” says Paul L. Harris, an expert on early childhood development at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. (Taylor also has personal experience with the subject. When her now grown daughter Amber was 3, she invented a friend named Michael Rose. At first, Taylor believed he was a kid from preschool. Then she learned he had a barnful of giraffes.)

Over the past decade, Taylor and her colleagues studied 100 children, both as preschoolers and again as 6- or 7-year-olds. In the second part of the study, as she and her colleagues talked to the older children about their imaginary friends, the researchers’ assumptions—long standard across the field of child development—began to disappear down the rabbit hole. [more](#)

#### PROFILE

**Real kid:** Calista, 4 (far left)  
**Imaginary friend:** Sally (near left)  
**Debut made:** Surfaced in the tub late last year.  
**Age:** “She is 4, just like me,” says Calista.  
**Address:** “She lives with us.”  
**Identifying marks:** “She has hair just like me and she looks like me. I wear the same pajamas as her.”  
**Favorite food:** “Salad. I don’t really like salad. But she does.”  
**Hobbies:** “She can ride a bike without training wheels. I still have to ride with my training wheels. Maybe she practices.”

#### PROFILE

Real kid: Lola, 4  
(below)

Imaginary friends:  
Mimi and Loggy  
(below)

Debut made: When  
Lola, at 2, moved  
to a new city.

Age: "Mimi is 4, and  
Loggy is 5," says  
Lola. "They are in  
second grade."

Identifying marks:  
"Mimi likes to wear  
a dot dress, which  
is currant. Loggy  
has a currant shirt,  
which is purple."

Hobbies: "They like  
to go to the park  
by themselves  
and they meet  
themselves there."



**Myth:** Imaginary friends indicate an emotional void.

**Reality:** Having them is often just plain fun.

Big names in child development had long maintained that kids must invent their friends for dark reasons. Even the ahead-of-his-time Dr. Benjamin Spock focused on the negative: "If he [the child] is spending a good part of each day telling about imaginary friends, not as a game, but as if he believed in them, it raises the question of whether his real life is satisfying enough. . . . If a child is living largely in his imagination and not adjusting well with other children, especially by the age of 4, a psychiatrist should be able to find what he is lacking."

This comes from the 1945–46 edition of his *Common Sense Book of Baby and Child Care*. But even a generation and a sea change in parenting attitudes later, Spock was still accentuating the negative in 1974's *Raising Children in a Difficult Time*. He wrote that for a child whose imaginary companion is "simply someone to have a good time with, she or he may need more opportunities to play with real children or some help in learning how to get along with them."

Taylor's study begs to differ: Most of the time, imaginary friends spring not from a place of shadows but of sunlight. "Very often adults think there is some deficit in a child's life that sparks the creation of imaginary friends, but that isn't necessarily true," says Taylor. The trauma of transition isn't usually the main catalyst, she explains. It's more often *the free time* that goes along with that transition.

Take Lola and her currant-loving companions. Having recently moved, Lola was cut off from her usual routine and (flesh-and-blood) friends. Thus she had more time on her hands. And that provided a stage on which her companions could make their grand entrance.

Free time? Is that all there is to it? Maybe, maybe not. There is another equally important impetus: "For many children," Taylor reports, "creating imaginary others is just a fun thing to do."



**Myth:** A small fraction of kids have imaginary friends.

**Reality:** It's much more widespread than you'd think.

Taylor found that 65 percent of children in the study up to age 7 reported having imaginary friends at some point in their young lives. This was *much* higher than was anticipated. Okay, so do the math: The most recent U.S. census (from 2000) tallies 23,652,523 children between the ages of 2 and 7. Using the two-out-of-three yardstick, that means there could be 16 million imaginary friends in our midst. If only they counted as tax deductions!

**Myth:** Introverts are more apt to have imaginary friends.

**Reality:** Nope, extroverts are.

Okay, this myth was busted prior to the 2004 study. But it's worth noting. In 1990, the authors of *The House of Make-Believe*—Yale's Dorothy G. Singer, now a senior research scientist, and Jerome L. Singer, now a professor emeritus of psychology—reported that their research did not support the old axiom that imaginary friends are linked to shyness or maladjustment. As Taylor puts it: "The kids who are choosing to create imaginary friends tend to be *more* sociable and to have *more* friends than other children."

**Myth:** The typical friend is just a kid's Mini-Me.

**Reality:** There is no "typical" friend. Diversity rules.

Another bombshell: When it comes to the imaginary friends themselves, there are no identifiable or predictable categories whatsoever.

"I was frustrated at first," admits Taylor, over finding no common physical characteristics across the, um, imaginary friend community. No shared personality traits, gender differences, or anything else.

"They can be anything from a mouse that sits on a shoulder to a flying penguin to a tiny baby in the palm of your hand," Taylor explains. "The diversity is actually the real finding."

#### PROFILE

**Real kid:** Trey, 3 (below)

**Imaginary friend:**

**Bobby (below)**

**Debut made:** Last year.

**Age:** 1½

**Address:** "He lives with me and he sleeps in my bed. I put him in my cubby at school."

**Identifying marks:**

"Sometimes he pretends he's a lion and goes roar. He is smaller than my hand."

**Favorite food:**

"Grapes. I like to feed him grapes."

**Hobbies:** "He likes to play with me."



## Frida and Her Friend

"I must have been six years old when I experienced an imaginary friendship with a little girl who was about the same age as me. I breathed on the window of my room and with a finger I drew a door. Full of great joy and urgency, I went out in my imagination through this door until I came to a dairy with the name of Pinzón. I entered the O of Pinzón and I went down in great haste into the interior of the earth, where my imaginary friend was always waiting for me." (Frida Kahlo, painter, 1907–1954)



#### PROFILE

Real kid: Marty, 4

(below)

Imaginary friend: Kiki

(above)

Debut made: Just after a birthday party gone bad.

Age: Also 4

Address: "Hawaii.

There are lots of volcanoes there. He lives far away from them to be safe."

Identifying marks:

Yellow head, green body, red toes:

"He painted them all himself."

Hobbies: "He loves his toy car. And dirt. He likes dirt."



**Myth:** Imaginary friends are the ones who make mistakes, the ones blamed for knocking over that vase.

**Reality:** They're often more like role models—even idols.

"Kids are thinking about issues around competence—what they can and can't do—and mulling that over in the context of interaction with their imaginary friend," says Taylor. "Who can do somersaults? Who can read? Who can tie their shoes? Who is riding a bike without training wheels? A lot of times the friend will be the one who can do it all."

**Myth:** When it comes to imaginary friends, kids confuse fantasy and reality.

**Reality:** Most kids know their friends are not, in fact, real.

Often, when Taylor's researchers are chatting with children about their imaginary companions, the kids stop in midstream to check and make sure the scientists know that the friends are pure make-believe.

**Myth:** Big kids don't have imaginary companions. It's a little-kid thing.

**Reality:** Children can hang on to them long past preschool.

The assumption was that imaginary friends scam by the time their conjurers turn 4. Wrong again. Taylor says one of the more startling things to come out of her study is the stats on longevity. Older kids (post-preschool, that is) continue to consort with imaginary friends as they age. It's possible for made-up friends to stay a long time—years, even. In fact, Taylor cites several famous adults who openly admitted *still* having imaginary friends. Paul Taylor, a cultural icon in the world of dance, attributed some of his work to his imaginary friend, who he said was named George H. Tacet, Ph.D. (we're not kidding). Call him the ultimate guest artist. <sup>1</sup>

Rachel Simpson's daughter, Michaela, has four imaginary friends. Michaela writes to them asking for coins. They write back, and they're very generous.

