The Carter–Jenkins Center presents
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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)
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.
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.
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.
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.
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)
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.
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.
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.
5. Imaginary companions are frequently seen immediately after the birth of a sibling.

6. Some imaginary companions become superego auxiliaries.
7. Such children “consult” their imaginary companions, who in turn instruct them to control their behavior in general or certain impulses in particular.
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.

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.
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.
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.
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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