

THOSE IMAGINARY FRIENDS

by Sally Burgess, Forefront Families LLC

I never had an imaginary friend myself, but my cousin Lizzie did. In fact, she had two, 'Little Bill' and 'Jail'. Lizzie was an only child with older parents and I suspect that Little Bill and Jail kept her company by taking the place of siblings she never had. Imaginary friends come in all sizes. They can be casual visitors, constant companions, human or otherwise. I wonder if Thumberlina or the seven dwarves started off as imaginary friends and became children's stories? Imaginary friends can be good company for preschoolers in particular, and once they develop a wider social network than home, their friend may quite naturally disappear.

Imaginary friends can also be very useful indicators for parents on what their kids are thinking and feeling. Son, Jordan, may tell you that his friend Brewster is frightened of the dark, feels lonely, sad, or guilty for telling lies. He might say Brewster has been hiding things or sneaking food out of the fridge or that Brewster doesn't want to go to summer camp and hates carrots. Brewster may have wet Jordan's bed or hit someone at school. These revelations are worth parents checking to see if their child is actually feeling or experiencing any of these things.

Jordan may tell Brewster stuff that he won't tell anyone else. This could be simply fun stuff that little children tell one another or it could either indicate a lack of trust in adults, or a fear of punishment for some wrongdoing. If the child is acting in a perturbed manner, then it is certainly worth looking into. Alex, my niece's 4 year-old son has an imaginary friend named 'Sydney'. As Alex is the 5th of 6 children he certainly isn't short on playmates. However, Sydney' appears to be a dark friend who tells Alex to do naughty things all the time. It could be that Alex feels as though he is not getting enough personal attention or he might be using 'Sydney' as his excuse for being naughty. If Alex is misbehaving because his friend told him to, then this may well indicate he needs attention.

There was a wonderful sitcom on Australian Television many years ago that regularly included an actress dressed up as a little girl who ended almost every sentence with, "It wasn't me. It was dolly!" It takes little children quite some time to learn what it means to take responsibility for their own actions, so imaginary friends come in very useful for taking the blame!

Parenting expert Amin Brott sets out the following rules for imaginary friends. I have added some examples. Don't let the imaginary friend be your child's only companion. Don't let your child use their friend as a crutch to blame for wrongdoing or to use as an excuse for not doing something they should e.g. "Brewster doesn't have to go to bed till 9o'clock, so I don't either." Treat your child's imaginary friend with respect. Don't dismiss the friend as nobody or

suddenly tell your child that Brewster just left for China and isn't coming back. Don't use their friend to manipulate your child e.g. "Brewster isn't scared of having a shot so you shouldn't be either."

Imaginary friends are a fun and healthy way for small children to extend their imagination. In almost all instances these friends become fond childhood memories once children expand their friendships and develop busy lives. It is not healthy to continue to avoid the reality of life – to live in fantasy. If you think your child may be in this category, then get expert help. Otherwise, just go with the flow and enjoy your children and their imaginary friends.

If you have any comments or questions on this subject, please do not hesitate to contact us at sally@forefrontfamilies.org. We invite you to also check out our website at www.forefrontfamilies.org and our blog site at www.forefrontfamilies.blogspot.com for further assistance.