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Children's play with their imaginary companions: Parent experiences and perceptions of the characteristics of the imaginary companions and purposes served.

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Abstract
Aims: Imaginary companions (ICs) are a common feature of childhood and parents often witness young children's play with their imaginary friends. This study investigated parent perceptions of ICs and explored associations between reported characteristics of the children and imaginary companions and purposes served.

Method: A self-selecting sample of 264 parents of children who had current or previous ICs completed questionnaires.

Findings: 60% of children had more than one imaginary companion. Imaginary companions mostly took human form (67%) with 19% taking animal form. Animal ICs were perceived as more important to the child. Imaginary companions served five distinct purposes: problem solving and management of emotion, exploration of ideals, companion for joint fantasy play, companion to overcome loneliness and to allow children to explore behaviour and roles. Parents saw the main purposes of the ICs to be to support fantasy play and a companion to play and have fun with. They also frequently gave examples of how ICs enabled children to process and deal with life events. The majority of parents (88%) did not think there were disadvantages in their child having an imaginary companion.

Limitations: The sample is likely to be skewed in terms of age and social status and thus not representative of the overall British population. Information is given on the demographic that are likely to have engaged with the research.

Conclusion: The quantitative and qualitative data from parents provide insights and contribute to the understanding of the varied purposes served by children's imaginary companions.

Key words imaginary companions, imaginary friends, invisible friends, pretend play, personified objects.

Imaginary companions (ICs) are a relatively common feature of childhood and have oft been studied, yet there have been relatively few large-scale studies of parental perspectives of this phenomenon. Yet many parents of young children have knowledge about their child's imaginary friends over time. This paper reports findings from a study of parents' descriptions and views on the nature, value and purposes of the imaginary companions experienced by their children.

Definitions of imaginary companions and reported incidence

Imaginary companions or imaginary friends are invisible characters that a child plays with and/or talks about over a period of several months or more and have an air of reality for the child (Svendsen, 1934). Pearson et al. (2001) in a study in the UK found that of nearly 1,800 children aged between 5-12 years, 46% reported having, or having had an imaginary companion. Reported incidence declined with age, thus 43% of children aged 6 years reported having current imaginary friends, compared with 19% of 10 year olds. However estimates on prevalence vary partly because some research in this area includes personified objects as part of the definition of an imaginary companion. Personified objects are special toys, such as teddy bears, dolls and so on, that the child develops an imaginary relationship with. The toy is imbued with a personality, expresses likes and dislikes, and may be referred to when talking to others. Thus, Taylor et al. (2004) in a study of 100 children in the United States found that 65% of 7 year olds will have had an imaginary companion (28% of these were personified objects) and that having an imaginary companion at 6-7 years was at least as likely as for the 3-4 year age range. Investigations of prevalence in older children may also be an underestimate as the imaginary friends of older children may be unknown to others (Majors, 2009 and 2013) and researchers have commented that older children sometimes report that they have said in the questionnaire/interview that they do not have a current imaginary friend, though have told the researcher later on, that they did have one (this was the case in the Pearson et al study referred to above and research by Hoff, 2004-2005).

Parent attitudes towards imaginary companions

Despite being a relatively common feature of childhood, there is little public understanding of the phenomenon and parents and professionals can sometimes show concern about their presence in a child's life (Brott, 2004). As Gleason (2004) points out, whilst parental reports of children's imaginary friends have usually been sort, less attention has been given to considering the views and responses of parents.

A historical review of the literature reveals two studies which did include an investigation of parent attitudes. Manosevitz et al. (1973) reported that of the 64 parents (primarily mothers) reporting that their child had an imaginary companion, 62% said that the imaginary companion 'was good for the child', 42% did not think there was any effect on the child, and only 4% felt that the imaginary companion had a 'harmful effect'. Fifty per cent were reported as encouraging the imaginary companion, 43% ignored it, and 7% reported that they discouraged the imaginary companion. In a study of parent views, Brooks and Knowles (1982) analysed questionnaires of 60 parents of preschool children reported to have imaginary companions. Forty of these participated in follow up interviews. The authors concluded that parents were not positively disposed towards play with imaginary companions. Most parents would not discourage or encourage play with imaginary companions, however some parents said that they would actively discourage this. The method used may have influenced these responses in that parents were asked to comment on hypothetical situations which they might not have experienced, and their responses might not necessarily have reflected what they would have

done if the situation had occurred with their child. These differences in views and experiences may also be a result of the relatively small sample sizes used or the historical era in which the research was conducted.

It is acknowledged that cultural and social values underpinning parent views may have a bearing on the existence and duration of the imaginary companion and whether it is known to others, Carlson, Taylor and Levin (1998). There can also be different expectations within a given culture. Gleason (2005) found differences between mothers and fathers in the perceived benefits of their child's imaginary companions and how positively or not, they viewed pretend play. Sugarman (2013) explored parental attitudes towards imaginary companions. Her findings indicated that within the UK, cultural background was less important than knowledge and experience of the child's imaginary friends. These parents showed consistently more positive attitudes towards the phenomenon than parents of children reported not to have imaginary friends.

Do imaginary companions serve useful purposes for children?
The purposes served by imaginary companions in normative populations have been examined empirically (Gleason, Sebanc & Hartup 2000). Clinical populations have been studied for example, by Bender and Vogel (1941), Nagera (1969), and Benson and Pryor (1973). It should be noted that children with emotional and/or psychological problems are not usually referred to clinicians because they have imaginary companions. Nevertheless, it was the curiosity of clinicians such as Bender and Vogel, and Nagera, who noticed the reporting of imaginary companions in some of the children and adults that they worked with, which led them to researching their role and purpose. Thus, Sugarman and Jaffe (1989) building on the work of Winnicott (1971) on play, reality and transitional phenomena, argue that imaginary companions are a form of transitional phenomena which enable the child to cope with frustrations and develop their sense of self. Nagera (1969) maintained that imaginary companions enabled ego development and conflict resolution, thus serving positive purposes.

A qualitative study of 8 children aged 5-11years with current companions found that they were a positive feature in the children's lives and served a range of useful purposes (Majors, 2009, 2013). In this research Interpretative Phenomenological Analyis was used to analyse interview transcripts (Smith & Eatough, 2006). Imaginary friends were perceived by the children to provide companionship and entertainment when others were not around. They also enabled children to explore what they found interesting around them in their daily lives and gain support when there were difficulties.

Cohen and Mackeith back in 1992 in their book, 'The Development of the Imagination: The Private Worlds of Childhood' comment that in terms of research and theorising, imagination has been a neglected aspect of development. In 1973, Singer had also made a similar claim. Harris (2000) is a pioneering developmental psychologist who has carried out innovative research to offer new theories on the importance of imagination not just for young children when they are engaged in pretend play, but at all stages of childhood and indeed, in adult development. He argues that imaginary companions influence cognitive, emotional and social development. He categorises imaginary companions alongside personification and impersonation (where a child takes on the identity of a character for an extended period) as evidence of 'sustained role play,' which he conceptualises as a high level form of imaginary activity. Harris theorises that through sustained role-play, children imagine different possibilities, which ultimately lead to a developed concept of reality.

The diversity of children with imaginary companions and characteristics of the imaginary companions
Various studies have sought to investigate the characteristics of children reporting imaginary companions, sometimes in comparison with children who do not report them. Thus, Bouldin and Pratt (2002) compared fear and anxiety levels for children with and without imaginary companions. They concluded that overall there was no indication that children with imaginary companions experienced emotional difficulties. Bouldin (2006) found that children with imaginary companions were more likely than children without imaginary companions to report vivid imagery when daydreaming and when playing pretend games, and mythical content for dreams and pretend games. Carlson and Taylor (2005) examined sex differences in children's fantasy play with imaginary companions and impersonated characters. No gender differences were found regarding verbal ability or fantasy disposition. Girls were significantly more likely to create imaginary companions, whereas boys to impersonate characters. Taylor and Mottweiler (2008) and Taylor, Shawber and Mannering (2012) comment on the many different kinds of imaginary companion and explored fantasy/reality distinctions. They concluded that children have a clear understanding of the imaginary status of their companions and do not confuse the boundary between fantasy and reality.

A challenge in carrying out research is the diversity of both the children reported to have imaginary companions and the characteristics of the imaginary companions. This was commented on in one of the earliest studies of the phenomenon (Ames and Learned, 1946, see also more recently, Taylor et al, 2004). Whilst the child's creation of imaginary friends is often part of normal development, the children who create them are diverse in terms of age, personality, life situation, educational need and experience of trauma (Majors, 2009). The characteristics of imaginary companions are highly varied and sometimes can change (Taylor et al. 2001;Taylor & Carlson, 2002). For example, Gleason, Sebanc and Hartup (2000) in a study of pre-school children found that parents reported that 44% and 39% of invisible companions and personified objects respectively had undergone a change.

Characteristics of imaginary companions in relation to purposes served
Taylor and Carlson (2002) identified 17 different types of imaginary companion which included playmate, invisible friends or animals with 'special characteristics' such as magical powers, superheroes, ghosts and imaginary companions identified as a presence. The authors noted that a wide range of short and long term functions seem to be served. Examples given are that whilst older invisible companions often served as a consultant or guide, baby invisible companions were to be cared for or taught. They suggest that imaginary companions act as a 'bridge to reality', that children can try out behaviours or conquer emotions relating to events in their lives.

Some studies report that children frequently chose a same sex imaginary companion, and whilst girls sometimes chose a male imaginary companion, boys did not choose girl imaginary companions (Taylor et al., 2004; Carlson &Taylor, 2005). These differences may reflect social and cultural expectations of gender, and may indicate that parents require more compliance with sex-role stereotypes in males and show more tolerance for cross-sex choices and behaviour in females.

Gleason et al. (2000) in an investigation of 78 pre-school children, carried out a detailed comparison of the characteristics of imaginary companions and personified objects. They found a significant difference in that children with invisible companions were more likely to have multiple friends, whereas children with personified objects were more likely to have just

one. There was also a difference in character; the majority of invisible companions were human, whereas the majority of personified objects were animals (see also: Taylor et al., 2004). The quality of the relationships was also significantly different. Children tended to have equal relationships with their invisible companions, whereas they provided nurturance for their personified object. This difference was reflected in some of the perceived purposes served: mothers of children with invisible companions perceived the purposes served as relating to providing a play mate (21%), need for a relationship (38%), birth order (29%), and changes in the family (29%). The respective percentages for mothers of children with personified objects were significantly lower (3%, 10%, 3% and 10%). Taylor et al. (2004) found that most older children (aged 6-7 years) had invisible companions, and that children with personified objects were more likely to be of pre-school age.

Several studies have commented on the more unfriendly aspects of some imaginary companions (e.g. Hoff, 2004-2005; Taylor, 1999; Taylor & Carlson, 2002). Thus Taylor and Carlson (2002) reported that 3% of imaginary companions were categorised as invisible enemies, who were mostly frightening or 'mean' in their interactions with the child. Hoff (2004-2005) categorised the influence of the imaginary companion as 'good' or 'bad'. Hoff draws on a psychodynamic interpretation - that imaginary companions can be used by the child who is internalising rules of behaviour to 'discharge unacceptable impulses'. Hoff views these events as part of the process of developing autonomy and following internalised parent expectations.

Parent experiences and perceptions – of what significance?
Parent reports of their child's imaginary companions are illuminating for several reasons, not least of which is the difficulty in obtaining reliable reports from younger children. Although parents have been asked about the presence and sometimes characteristics of the imaginary friends, their experiences and views of their children's imaginary companions have not always been sought. Parents often have direct experience of their young children's imaginary companions. Young children often invite a parent to participate in the pretence e.g. requesting that a place be laid at the table for the imaginary friend. Young children also give accounts to parents about what the imaginary friend has been doing. Parents may also observe and be aware of some of the feelings expressed by their child and their emotional state when interacting with their imaginary friends. Parents have knowledge of their children's characteristics and of events going on in their lives and may be in a position to see when interactions with the imaginary friends relate to what is happening in their child's life. Children sometimes have a number of imaginary friends and parents may have knowledge of these along with the emergence and disappearance of the imaginary friends over time and the diversity of their characteristics. Research evidence suggests that parents are generally accurate when reporting about their child's imaginary companions. Gleason (2004) compared preschool children and parent descriptions of the imaginary companions, including personified objects. She found agreement of parent and child descriptions of invisible friends and personified objects including the form, gender and description of the imaginary companion. However they may be less accurate when reporting on the imaginary companions of older children (Majors, 2013; Hoff, 2004-2005; Pearson et al. 2001).

Parents then are well placed informants about the nature and possible purposes of the imaginary companions of their children.

Research questions

This study aimed to gain the views of a large sample of parents whose children had current or previous imaginary companions. A parent questionnaire was designed to provide both quantitative and qualitative data in order to address the research questions:

What are the characteristics of imaginary companions?
What perceived purposes are served by the imaginary companions?
Do parents perceive there to be disadvantages for their child in having an imaginary companion?

Method
A questionnaire was designed for parents of children who had current or previous imaginary companions. This sought both quantitative and qualitative data in relation to the research questions.

Participants
Opportunistic sampling was used to recruit parents for the pilot and main study. One of the researchers was interviewed for the 'Today' morning news programme on BBC Radio 4, a national British radio station, on children's imaginary friends and wrote an article for the BBC on line news that day: 13th January 2011, (Author 1, 2011). People were invited to contact the first author if they wished to complete a parent questionnaire about their child's imaginary friends. With a weekly average of about 7 million listeners that tune in to the 'Today' programme, this interview will have reached a substantial portion of the general public. Nevertheless this will have been a particular section of society. Recent data (BBC Trust, 2015) on the demographic of Radio 4 listeners suggests that they are balanced in terms of gender, but are twice as likely to be from a white ethnic background as from Black, Asian and Minority ethnic groups, and the majority of listeners are aged 35 and above (with 40% being over 45). Radio 4 listeners are more likely to come from the top half of NRS social grades. Information on the demographic that listen to the 'Today' programme is not available but would be expected to be less skewed with a lower average in terms of age and social grade than Radio 4 listeners in general.

This article reports on the parent questionnaires received (264 questionnaires). It is not possible to give accurate information about how many questionnaires were distributed as it came to light that parents had put the questionnaire on different websites for other parents to complete, or had forwarded it to family members or friends who might be interested.

Questionnaire
The questionnaire sought information including age of child, position in family, age when the child had their imaginary friend(s), and whether the parent recalled having an imaginary friend. Parents were asked about the form the imaginary companion took i.e. animal or human form, and whether they were based on a toy (personified object) or completely invisible and whether they had magical properties and to give a description. Parents were then asked to consider why their child might have an imaginary friend by completing Table A (see Appendices) for up to 3 imaginary friends. The reasons identified in the Table were drawn from a review of the imaginary companion literature on possible functions served, and data from the pilot study where 9 parents had been interviewed. Parents were asked to state whether they thought there were disadvantages in their child having an imaginary friend, and if so, to describe these. They were then asked to complete Likert scales to indicate how important and influential they thought the child's imaginary companion was to them.

The research procedure for obtaining consent and protecting the rights and wellbeing of participants was informed by ethical guidelines drawn up by The British Psychological Society (2009). Parents were given information about the purposes of the research and their right not to answer questions and their right to withdraw. They were also given assurances about maintaining confidentiality.

Analyses
Numerical data were analysed using a range of statistical tests. Where data did not meet the assumptions underpinning parametric tests, non-parametric alternatives were used.

Textual data in the form of parent views expressed in the questionnaires were analysed to look for patterns of responses. An inductive approach was taken in the process of coding the data across the data set and identifying themes. Phases of the thematic analysis included the generation of initial codes, searching and reviewing themes and defining and naming themes (Braun and Clarke 2006). The main themes that were found closely related to the purposes referred to in Table A (Appendix) and are described below. Quotes from parents are included to illustrate each theme. The names of the children have been changed, however the names of the imaginary friends have been retained.

Findings
Two hundred and twenty-five questionnaires were completed by mothers (85%), 29 by fathers (11%) and 10 by mothers and fathers (4%). Ninety-six per cent of participants were living in the UK and 92% described themselves as British. Nearly a quarter of parents (24%) recall that they had had an imaginary companion.

Table 1. Mean duration (in years) of the main imaginary companion in relation to child position in the family.

Child position in family	Duration of IC	
	Mean	SD
Only child	2.67	1.54
Eldest child	2.08	1.49
Middle child	3.75	2.68
Youngest child	2.87	1.87
Total	2.56	1.75

Children with an imaginary companion were more likely to be the eldest (37%) or only children at the time of the study (36%), with 22% of the sample being the youngest. Middle children were less likely to have an imaginary companion (6%) though the sample contained few children who were in this category (16 cases). This may not be surprising since middle children only appear in families with 3 children or more.

In this study, 67% of the total 264 children reported to have imaginary companions were girls, and 33% were boys. Highlighting the value of a parent questionnaire, 42% of imaginary companions had emerged by the time the children were 2 years of age, 82% by the time the children were 3 years of age and 99% of imaginary companions had emerged by the time the children were aged 7 years. The mean age for children starting to have an imaginary companion was 2.80 years (*SD* 1.10, *Min.* 1, *Max.* 10) and the mean age for their

disappearance was 4.80 years (*SD* 2.10, *Min.* 2, *Max.* 12). These figures did not vary significantly by child sex, (*M* 2.75, *SD* 1.11 for girls and *M* 3.07, *SD* 2.77 for boys) for starting age or for end age (*M* 4.92, *SD* 2.34 for girls and *M* 5.05, *SD* 3.81 for boys).

An examination was carried out of the duration (in years) of the imaginary companion in relation to the child's position in the family (see Table 1) using a Kruskal Wallis non-parametric test. This revealed a significant effect, $H(3)=11.79$, $p<.01$. Surprisingly, follow-up Mann Whitney tests suggest that middle children have their imaginary companions for significantly longer than older children, $U(93)=368$, $Z= -2.04$, $p<.05$. It is important to note that there were only 16 middle children (6% of cases) indicating the imaginary companions are much less common amongst this group.

Table 2. Child sex in relation to the reported gender of the main imaginary companion.

Child Sex		Gender of IC			
		Female	Male	Other	Total
Girls	%	51.2%	34.6%	14.2%	
	Count	83 (65.1)	56 (76.6)	23 (20.3)	162
Boys	%	16.9%	74.0%	9.1%	
	Count	13 (30.9)	57 (36.4)	7 (9.7)	77
Total	%	40.2%	47.3%	12.6%	
	Count	96	113	30	239

Note. Expected count in parentheses

Children were more likely to have more than 1 imaginary companion, with 20% having 2, and 40% reported as having 3 or more imaginary companions. Boys were as likely as girls to have more than one imaginary companion. To avoid breaching statistical assumptions of independence underpinning inferential tests, all analyses, except for those presented in Table 4, and where noted, relate to the main imaginary companion identified by parent only.

Table 3. Form of main imaginary companion in relation to the perceived importance and the perceived influence of the imaginary companion

Form of IC		Perceived importance of IC		Perceived influence of IC	
	N	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Animal form	49	5.81	1.19	4.17	1.93
Human form	176	4.97	1.41	3.65	1.61
Magical form	23	4.96	1.46	3.61	1.78
Mix of 2 or 3 forms	15	5.73	1.16	4.36	1.74
Total	263	5.17	1.40	3.78	1.70

Children were more likely to have an imaginary companion who was the same sex as themselves (Table 2), with some girls also having male imaginary companions. Boys were less likely than girls to have imaginary companions of the opposite sex, $\chi^2(2, N=239) = 34.60$, $p<.001$. Imaginary companions were often reported as taking human form (67%), sometimes animal form (19%) and some had magical properties (9%). Imaginary companion form did not vary by child sex. The majority (89%) of imaginary companions were reported as being completely invisible rather than being based on a toy. Thus few personified objects were included in this study.

Imaginary companions had many positive characteristics. Approximately 10% of parents identified some negative characteristics. These were described primarily as the imaginary companion being naughty, misbehaving, non-compliant and sometimes arguing with the child. There were only 3 instances where the imaginary companion scared the child, or told the child to do things.

On a scale of 1 to 7, the majority of parents felt that their child's imaginary companion was fairly important (*M* 5.15, *SD* 1.41) though there were more balanced ratings of how influential the imaginary companion was perceived to be (*M* 3.75, *SD* 1.71).

Table 4. Perceived purposes (% and number) of all 379 imaginary companions reported.

Perceived purpose	Responses for 379 ICs reported			
	Largely	Partly	Unsure	Not at all
Supports fantasy play	66.0% 252	23.3% 89	7.3% 28	3.4% 13
As a play companion	57.8% 219	33.2% 126	4.7% 18	4.2% 16
To provide comfort and support	26.5% 99	31.8% 119	18.7% 70	23.0% 86
To take control of, parent or boss around	26.2% 99	26.2% 99	4.2% 16	43.4% 164
To allow child to do prohibited things/ share blame	21.8% 82	25.5% 96	3.7% 14	49.1% 185
To escape reality	17.3% 66	36.2% 138	16.3% 62	30.2% 115
To provide guidance to overcome problems	13.8% 52	24.9% 94	25.7% 97	35.7% 135
To help express emotions	11.5% 43	25.7% 96	15.0% 56	47.9% 179
To overcome loneliness	11.4% 43	35.5% 134	19.9% 75	33.2% 125
To help fulfil wishes	11.3% 43	29.2% 111	21.1% 80	38.4% 146
Is the child's ideal self	6.9% 26	16.4% 62	21.4% 81	55.3% 209

Note. Percentages are calculated as a proportion of total imaginary companions and not total respondents.

The perceived importance of imaginary companions did not vary between parents that had had ICs themselves and those that had not had imaginary companions.. ANOVAs also indicated that perceived importance and influence did not vary by child position in the family, child sex, child age at imaginary companion onset, nor gender of the imaginary companion. However, as is evident in Table 3, imaginary companions that took animal form were

perceived as more important than imaginary companions that were of human form, $F(3,256)=5.69$, $p=.001$, $\omega=.22$.

Non-parametric Mann-Whitney U tests were used to test for sex differences in the reasons given by parents for the presence of the child's imaginary companions (Table 5). The purposes of '*as a play companion*' and '*to take control of, parent or boss around*', were perceived to be more likely for girls with imaginary companions than for boys, ($U(263)=6,478$, $Z= -2.30$, $p<.05$ and $U(248)=5,391$, $Z= -2.95$, $p<.01$, respectively).

Kruskal Wallis tests were used to examine the connection between perceived purposes and the gender and form of the imaginary companion. Analyses indicate differences across different imaginary companion gender types (see Table 5) in the ratings of the imaginary companion providing '*help express emotions*' and '*guidance for problems and fears*' ($H(2)=5.99$, $p=.05$, and $H(2)=13.0$, $p<.01$, for each measure respectively). Follow-up tests suggest that a female imaginary companion was more likely to be perceived as to '*help express emotions*' and provide '*guidance for problems and fears*' than a male imaginary companion or mixed/variable gender imaginary companions.

The form of the imaginary companion also seemed to have a bearing on perceived purpose, $H(2)=7.30$, $p<.05$, with animal imaginary companions (*M 1*.78, *SD* 1.01) more likely to be associated with '*escaping reality*' than imaginary companions that take a human form (*M 1*.39, *SD* 1.12).

As there are overlaps in the items relating to the 11 possible reasons for the imaginary companion, a principal components analysis with a varimax rotation was conducted on these data but for the main imaginary companion only. This enables reduction of the items into more general themes. The Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin measure and separate values suggested that sampling was adequate. Five components had eigenvalues over Kaiser's criterion of 1 explaining in combination 68% of the variance. Table 6 shows the factor loadings after rotation. The analysis identified a 5-component solution with the reasons clustering for main components of 'enabling problem solving and emotion management', 'enabling the exploration of ideals', 'providing a fantasy play companion', 'providing a companion to overcome loneliness' and 'enabling the exploration of behaviour and roles'.

Parents' views
The qualitative textual data also provided further insights into the purposes and benefits of imaginary companions. These included outlet for creative play, friend and play mate, to make sense of and cope with events, wish fulfilment, and behaviour regulation. Illustrative quotes are given for each of these:

Outlet for imaginative play, creativity and/or language
Parents commented on how play with imaginary friends provided a vehicle for their child's imagination and creativity. Parent of Amy aged 9 years, who had imaginary friends who were more prevalent when Amy was younger:

> 'Amy is very creative. She writes lots of stories and reads a lot. Badger (imaginary friend) disappeared with her ability to read books and write stories. I think he was there to help her with story making.'

Table 5. Ratings of perceived purposes of the main imaginary companion in relation to child sex and the gender of imaginary companion.

Reasons for main Imaginary Companion	Child sex				Gender of Main Imaginary Companion					
	Female		Male		Female IC		Male IC		Other IC	
	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
As a play companion	2.53$_a$	.66	2.23$_b$	.94	2.54	.68	2.37	.81	2.53	.68
To overcome loneliness	1.29	1.00	1.20	1.09	1.32	0.99	1.19	1.03	1.07	1.11
To provide comfort and support	1.72	1.10	1.77	1.11	1.88	1.06	1.65	1.11	1.40	1.07
To take control of or boss around parent	1.45$_a$	1.24	.94$_b$	1.23	1.18	1.21	1.27	1.31	1.67	1.18
To help express emotions	1.10	1.11	0.92	1.13	1.20^+_a	1.09	.83$_b$	1.08	.97$_b$	1.19
To allow child to do prohibited things/ share blame	1.31	1.25	1.22	1.32	1.35	1.26	1.27	1.30	1.42	1.26
Is the child's ideal self	.74	.97	.95	1.03	.89	1.01	.77	.99	.63	.96
Supports fantasy play	2.52	.80	2.52	.78	2.64	.71	2.41	.88	2.66	.72
To escape reality	1.43	1.09	1.60	1.14	1.41	1.10	1.52	1.10	1.50	1.11
To provide guidance to overcome problems	1.31	1.04	1.08	1.12	1.49$_a$	.98	1.08$_b$	1.13	.83$_b$	.93
To help fulfil wishes	1.21	1.05	1.26	1.10	1.32	1.06	1.12	1.07	1.17	1.05

Note. + = approaching significance with ANOVA p<.06

Differing subscripts (e.g. a, b) indicate significant differences between groups at p<.05 in Mann Whitney follow up tests.

Table 6. Principle Components Analysis with Varimax Rotation of the Perceived Reasons for the Main Imaginary Companion

	Rotated Component Loadings				
	Enables problem solving and emotion management	Enables exploration of ideals	Provides a fantasy play companion	Provides company to overcome loneliness	Enables exploration of behaviour and roles
Provides guidance and helps work through problems	.783				
Provides comfort, support and understanding	.764				
Helps with the expression of emotions	.752				.326
Helps fulfil wishes		.755			
Is the ideal self		.718			
Enables escape from reality		.629	.314		
Supports fantasy play			.821		
Play Companion			.751	.336	
Overcome loneliness				.824	
Does things the child is not allowed/ joint blame					.778
Someone to parent or boss around		-.312		.553	.557
Eigenvalues	2.51	1.55	1.26	1.16	1.01
% of variance	22.84	14.12	11.49	10.55	9.14

Note. Loadings below .30 are not displayed

Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin = .64

KMO values range = .42 to .77 (1 value is less than .5)

Bartlett's test of sphericity χ^2 (55) = 396.22 p<.001

Friend/playmate for games, fun and joining in

The imaginary friends provided playmates at times when others might not be available, and enabled the child to play interactive games even in the absence of real friends. Imaginary friends provided fun and entertainment for the child and often for the family too, enhancing family activities. Parent of Pheobe aged 2 years:

> 'Billy (an imaginary dog) usually makes an appearance at the dinner table – either getting told off for jumping up on the table/eating her food or he sniffs and tickles her toes…I think he was invented to have fun with!'

Parent of Mark when he was aged 2-4 years, on imaginary friend Muddle:

> 'I feel he added to both our lives…He was fun to have around, loved to join in with any games, was not grumpy or bad-tempered. I missed him when one day he suddenly left'

Make sense of events/cope

Interactions with the imaginary friends and communication to parents about what the imaginary friend had done or said also enabled children to make sense of and/or prepare for what was going on in their day-to-day lives. Further, discussions with parents about the actions of imaginary friends helped children make sense of events. Parent of Alice aged 6 years:

> Amy (imaginary friend) is usually included if Alice has something new or exciting to tell or show.'

Parent of Claire aged 6 years:

> 'She also often played out new ideas or life changes through Ponkele and Pankele – they always come on holiday with us, and they have a new baby sister when we do…. In particular, we would hear about them at the beginning of anything new: for example, the first few times we went camping or to the beach, Claire would describe in detail where Ponkele and Pankele were, what their tent was like etc. But as the novelty and perhaps anxiety around the experience waned, they would be forgotten.'

There were numerous examples from parents to illustrate how some children were able to work through and cope with difficult issues and gain comfort and support from their imaginary friends. Issues related to significant life events e.g. birth of a sibling, moving house or country, bereavement and loss of relatives, pets, adoption and fostering, illness, and starting school.

Parent of Olivia aged 5 years:

> 'Olivia tells us what is happening in Lala's life which is actually often Olivia working through how things work in our real lives. For example, when one of her great grandmothers was very poorly, Olivia would tell us how Lala felt and how all Lala's family and friends felt about it…. It's almost sometimes as though Olivia is talking about herself in the third person.'

Wish fulfilment

Some imaginary friends were seen as providing a sense of wish fulfilment by providing access to desired experiences, people, and possessions albeit in imaginary form: this frequently referred to the desire to have a sibling or pet. Parent of Lily aged 4 years 5 months:

> 'Lily would really like older brothers and sisters so most of her imaginary friends fulfil this desire.'

Parent of Simon aged 3 years:

> 'Hootso Bootso (imaginary friend) could do anything, make his car do anything. break rules and come out victorious and he never got hurt.'

Behaviour regulation

Parents gave examples where children seemed to test parent boundaries and likely reactions to behaviours via their imaginary friends.

Parent of Nina who had her imaginary friends when she was aged 2-4 years.

> 'Hayley (imaginary friend) could be very naughty as if Nina was testing the likely response to an action.'

Perceived disadvantages

Most parents did not think there were disadvantages to their child having an imaginary friend, with 88% parents saying that there were not, and 12% indicating that they did think there were disadvantages. Of these, six parents thought that their child had spent too much time with their imaginary friends at the expense of time spent with other children. Nine parents felt that there were or might be negative reactions from others. Some parents commented that whilst they themselves did not perceive disadvantages, others appeared to show concern or negative reactions:

> 'Several relatives expressed concern about Jonathan having an imaginary friend...'

> 'Other parents may think its odd and often assume that my child is lonely.'

Four parents thought that there were no disadvantages for the child, though there were disadvantages for the parent. Several parents commented, for example, that it could be time consuming and frustrating when the parents were in a rush and the imaginary friend had to be strapped into the car seat. Parents also had to think carefully about how to respond in situations e.g. when the imaginary friend was blamed for scribbling on wallpaper in some one else's house. Four parents said that there were confusions about whom the child was talking about that needed to be managed when children talked about their imaginary friends to other children and adults:

> 'Parents at this school think he is in foster care because of his casual references to his new (imaginary) family.'

Parent concerns

Six parents stated that they did have concerns. These included concerns about negative perceptions of others, whether they might impact on real friendships and whether they were healthy sign or not for their child:

> 'When they all appeared I was a little perplexed and very slightly freaked for a few days. I researched on line and there is not much out there, but the general gist is go with it, don't actively encourage or discourage them.'

Several other parents commented that they were not concerned at this stage because their child did not have frequent and regular contact with their imaginary friends, that their child interacted with their imaginary friend only at home, and/or that their child was at a young age. The implication to these comments is that some parents might well be more concerned if children frequently had contact with their imaginary friends, at home and in other settings and if they were still around when their child was older.

Advantages

Parents were not asked specifically about what they perceived to be advantages, though some parents did write about these. Parents noted some advantages for example; involving the imaginary friend was used as a way of tackling difficult issues with the child. Several parents said that the presence of the imaginary friend on family activities helped make things more enjoyable for the child (and sometimes entertaining for the family). Parent comments:

> 'Jack's imaginary friends are very useful in situations where he needs encouragement or to be distracted and spurred on….when we go walking in the hills if he is getting tired…I can ask him to tell me where his friends are and what they are doing and he will happily tell me all about them all the way back to the car'.

> 'My son's imaginary friends proved very useful to me too; for example, we had 'getting dressed' competitions to see who could dress themselves most quickly.'

To conclude, parents in this study commented positively on their child's interactions with their imaginary friends and perceived that positive purposes were served.

Discussion

This study sought to investigate parents' descriptions and perceptions of their child's imaginary companion/s and to explore associations between reported characteristics of the children, the imaginary companions and the purposes served by these companions.

An important finding in this study was that the majority of parents held positive views about their child having imaginary companions and many felt that the imaginary companion was significant for their child. They perceived that positive purposes were being served, particularly in relation to supporting fantasy play and companionship. Parents frequently commented on how their children loved listening to stories, creating and enacting scenarios with their imaginary friends and later writing stories. For many children in this study imaginary friends provided a vehicle for their imagination. It is evident that in this study, parents valued their children's imaginary activities. The research and theorising of Harris (2000 and 2007) facilitates a better understanding of why imagination and imaginary activities such as play with imaginary companions is important in terms child development. It is generally accepted that children learn from direct experience. Harris (2007) draws on

innovative research with young children to theorise that children are not just 'scientific explorers'. Importantly, using imagination, they can explore possibilities, which may be different from their direct experience and can use reason to come to new conclusions. Harris hypothesises that children can learn much by using their imagination in relation to 'testimony' provided by adults. They can, through imagination, make representations of what they have been told – thus they can contemplate and reason about situations outside of direct experience. As Harris asserts, these capacities are usually well developed through children's play and imaginary activities before schooling starts and is a good preparation for school education where these capacities are regularly drawn upon.

As discussed earlier, children with imaginary friends are not a homogeneous group. For example children who are traumatised or who have special educational needs also have imaginary friends. More research is needed to explore whether the characteristics of these imaginary friends differ and whether similar or different purposes are served. Calver (2009) interviewed parents of children with autism who had imaginary friends, and found that parents did have more concerns. Educational Psychologists would be in good position to assess the child in context to identify issues for the individual, family and school situation and whether the imaginary companion was part of normal development or meeting a more specific need, and they may be in a position to comment on how far imaginary friend is a positive influence.

Parents perceived their child's imaginary companions to primarily support fantasy play, provide supplementary friends and play mates and also to help children make sense of and cope with events and feelings in their lives. These views are in keeping with other research e.g. Gleason et al. 2000; Harris, 2000, Majors 2009, 2013 and Hoff-2004-2005. Parents frequently commented on how imaginary companions provided comfort and were sometimes powerful allies when a child was afraid or uncertain about a new situation. Clark (2003) comments that imaginary companions have sometimes been viewed negatively. She maintains that the imaginary inventions of children have been trivialised. Her research on how children cope with chronic illness shows that children have remarkable capacity to cope in these difficult situations through using their imagination, which she terms 'imaginal coping'. Coping activities include play, humour, stories, ritual and prayer. Examples are given of how children would draw on imagined relationships with super hero characters and toys for comfort and support. Through play they might act out medical procedures using the imagination to transform and reframe the difficulties of illness. On other occasions, children would engage in play with delight and openness. Clark reminds us that this play is not pursuing particular goals though can still have profound positive outcomes. It seems to us that parent reports in our research of how children enjoyed fantasy play and also drew on their interactions with their imaginary friends at times of difficulties in their lives does fit with Clark's conceptualisation of imaginal coping.

Interactions with imaginary companions and parents may enable some children to check possible reactions and help them to regulate their behaviour. These parent observations and perceptions would seem to illustrate and be in accord with the psychoanalytic theories of Sugarman and Jaffe (1989) and Nagera (1969) regarding ego development, conflict resolution and drive regulation. Hoff 2004-2005 draws on both psychoanalytic interpretations and social cognitive and self-theories. Imaginary companions are primarily conceptualised as 'inner mentors' with one of the 5 main categories being motivation and self-regulation. Thus Hoff reports on occasions where the imaginary companion is a 'bad' influence. She suggests that imaginary companions can be used by the child to 'discharge unacceptable impulses'

thus supporting the process of internalising parent expectations of behaviour and developing autonomy.

The research cited in this article should be reassuring to parents who are concerned or anxious when children's imaginary companions appear. Young children often do invite parents to interact with the imaginary companion, and it is suggested that parents where appropriate, could make use of these interactions to engage with their child over matters that are important to them. Where there are anxieties or difficulties, this could support the child's imaginal coping (as in Clark, 2003). It is also relevant to note here that if adults pay too much attention to the imaginary friend or tries to direct it, it is likely to disappear!

It is important to note here, that children's play and play with imaginary companions are positive experiences for the child, in their own right, even if not seemingly relating to issues elsewhere. Through play with imaginary friends, children are able to entertain themselves and they can also serve as a welcome distraction from problems. Where parents are concerned that too much time is spent interacting with the imaginary companion, encouragement to see friends and participate in other activities could be suggested and parents could be advised to pay less attention to the imaginary friend. To conclude this section, children's imaginary activities are a valuable part of development and can be encouraged. Indeed, as Harris (2000) points out, it is when children do have difficulties with use of imagination, such as children on the autistic spectrum, that children are more likely to have difficulties with cognition, and emotional and social development. It is also pertinent to raise the question here of whether children's education and supervised activities out of school have curtailed time available for more imaginative and creative activities. Richardson (2013) interviewed artists and experts in the field and argues that children need time to be bored in order to have the space to develop imaginative and creative endeavours.

Most of the children had more than one imaginary companion and this raises the question of whether different purposes were served by the individual imaginary companions. Our study revealed variation in parent perceptions; some parents indicated that similar purposes were being served, others thought that different purposes were being served by their child's individual imaginary friends. It was beyond this study to compare the multiple functions within a child of these different companions, for example in terms of whether they fulfil different purposes. However, it would be prudent for future researchers to focus on this possibility. A main methodological difficulty is distinguishing between a main imaginary companion and additional companions. Parents may tend to report on the one companion that is most salient in their minds rather than companions that are the most important to a child or that have the most significant implications for a child. Resolving this problem may involve the combination of child and adult report data. While ICs are likely to fulfil multiple purposes it may be the case that certain uses of ICs may predict longer term outcomes and whether the ICs are enduring or not. In some cases, as suggested by the data from the current study, ICs may become tools for thought and coping in difficult contexts, as such they may offer a unique way of dealing with developmental challenges and personal difficulties.

From this sample of parents, three quarters of children with imaginary companions were girls, a finding consistent with previous research (Hoff 2005; Pearson et al., 2001). It was also notable that the majority of ICs were of the same sex as the child. Boys were less likely to have imaginary companions of the opposite sex. It is possible that these gender differences do reflect social and cultural attitudes with boys having less freedom to experience this form of imaginary play and with more compliance expected to sex-role stereotypes. On the other

hand these may reflect developmental differences in imaginary play styles. For example, Carlson and Taylor (2005) found that girls aged 3-4 years old were more likely to have imaginary companions, whereas boys of the same age tended to impersonate characters. Similarly studies suggest that girls are more likely to engage in imaginary play during the early years (Smith 2010) and others suggest more fantasy play amongst boys in middle to late childhood (Baines & Blatchford 2011). It is likely that the preponderance of girls with ICs relates to a combination of socio-cultural and developmental changes as well as the purposes of the type of play or developmental challenges that children face. Our findings also suggest that purposes varied according to the gender of the child and characteristics of the IC. Girls appeared to be more likely to utilise an IC as a play companion and as someone to parent or care for. This study is the first, as far as we know, to examine the implications of ICs of different gender and we found that female ICs seemed to be more connected to the provision of guidance to overcome problems and possibly to help with the expression of emotions. Further research should examine the characteristics of ICs and how they relate to purposes and activities and the needs of the children that engage with them.

Children with ICs were more likely to be the eldest or only child at the time the imaginary companion emerged, replicating findings from previous studies (Ames & Learned, 1946; Manosevitz et al., 1973). This suggests that children may draw on imaginary companions when others are not around to play with, overcoming what would otherwise be times of loneliness. Whilst middle children with imaginary companions were less well represented in the data set (unsurprising given the reduced prevalence of 3 child or more families), an interesting finding was that they endured for a significantly longer period. It is possible that imaginary friends serve different purposes for middle children and this warrants further research.

In this research most imaginary companions were of a human form (69%) with animal forms accounting for a fifth of ICs. These findings are broadly consistent with those of Taylor and Mannering (2006) who found that of the 592 descriptions of ICs, sixty per cent were invisible companions and fifteen per cent took animal rather than human form. Unexpected findings in the current study were that imaginary animals were perceived by parents to be more important, and more likely to be associated with 'escaping reality' than invisible companions of human form. This warrants further investigation. Animal imaginary friends perceived to be more important does suggest to us that specific purposes were being served.

Approximately 10% of parents commented on the more negative characteristics of some imaginary friends such as being naughty, unfriendly or arguing with the child. Our view is that these negative characteristics are not necessarily problematic. In an exploration of children's perceptions of their imaginary companions, the non-compliance of the imaginary companion fostered the illusion of the will and independence of the imaginary companion and this increased the child's interest in them and made them seem more real (Majors, 2009). In the current study, there was no evidence that negative characteristics of the imaginary companions were associated with negative outcomes or worked against the best interests of the child. There were only 3 occasions where the imaginary companion was perceived to be mean or scary. Taylor and Carlson (2002) also found that a small percentage (3%) of imaginary companions were invisible enemies or were frightening or mean to the children. Research concerning the characteristics of imaginary companions and the quality of the interactions children have with them is at a relatively early stage. Further research is needed on purposes served by imaginary companions in both normative and clinical samples. McLewin and Muller (2006) in an innovative study review the imaginary companion

research from normative and Dissociation Identity Disorder populations and have identified distinctions between the imaginary companions of both groups. One distinction of relevance here is that in the normative sample the nature of the imaginary companion is benevolent and under the child's control, whereas in the Dissociation Identity Disorder sample, the imaginary companion is sometimes malevolent, acting against the child. The authors note that distinctions are tentative as they are based on the limited research available. It is argued that further research in this area could help to clarify at an earlier stage when imaginary friends may become associated with pathology, where clinical intervention would be beneficial. Spender et al (2011) usefully consider childhood fantasy including imaginary companions and hearing voices and have drawn up a table outlining a continuum of experiences from a 'near to normal pole' to a 'nearer to psychotic pole'.

The authors acknowledge that the self-selecting sample is unlikely to be representative of all families with children with imaginary companions but could be in relation to the demographic of parents that listened to and engaged with the interview and article for the BBC. It might be the case that parents who were interested in their children's imaginary friends, and possibly more favourably disposed to them, were more likely to participate in the research. So while the findings may not be entirely representative they are indicative of the range and nature of parents views and understanding about their children's ICs. Nevertheless it is important to recognise that there are few studies that have explored data on so many children and their multiple ICs and thus provides findings that can be explored further in other studies. Another limitation is that only a minority of children had personified objects as imaginary friends. If potential research participants had been given at the outset, a description of imaginary friends which included a description of personified objects, this might have altered the sample of research participants to include more children who had such imaginary friends. This in all likelihood reflects common perceptions that ICs tend to be invisible and completely imaginary.

Conclusion
The principal components analysis identified what appeared to be five distinct purposes ranging from the IC acting to enable problem solving and the management of emotion, to enable the exploration of ideals, as a companion for joint fantasy play, as a companion to overcome times of loneliness and to allow children to explore behaviours and roles. This is just a first attempt to get a handle on the functions of ICs and provides valuable insights. An approach that draws on both child and parental report, possibly through interviews, might provide more robust understanding of the multifunctionality of ICs and possible connections with outcomes. Nevertheless the quantitative and qualitative data do provide insights into parental experiences and the purposes of imaginary friends.

This study has revealed some differences in imaginary companions according to gender of the child and gender and characteristics of the imaginary companion. The characteristics of some imaginary companions appear to be associated with particular purposes. Taylor and Carlson (2002) have usefully compiled a taxonomy of imaginary companions based on their description and physical characteristics. It is argued that developing a taxonomy to include gender and personality characteristics of imaginary companions and possible purposes served would enable a greater understanding of the roles imaginary companions play in children's lives. Parent perspectives alongside children's views and adult recollections would provide valuable data, as in the current study.

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Appendix

Table A

Reasons for having an imaginary friend	Was it a factor?			
	Not at all A	Not sure B	Partly C	Largely D
1. As a companion, to play and have fun with				
2. To overcome loneliness				
3. The imaginary friend provides comfort, support, understanding, or is dependable				
4. The imaginary friend is something to take control of, parent, or boss around				
5. The imaginary friend expresses emotions your child doesn't or helps the expression of emotion e.g. airing grievances, fears				
6. The imaginary friend does things the child can't/isn't allowed to do, or shares the blame with the child				
7. The imaginary friend is the child's ideal self				
8. The imaginary friend supports fantasy play and/or is a way of thinking about interesting events or people				
9. The imaginary friend enables the child to escape reality				
10. The imaginary friend provides guidance, helps the child work through problems/emotions/fears				
11. The imaginary friend helps fulfil wishes (what the child really wants to happen)				
Other – please specify				