ED 419 629   PS 026 590

AUTHOR   Gleason, Tracy R.; Sebanc, Anne M.; McGinley, Jennifer;
                Hartup, Willard W.
TITLE   Invisible Friends and Personified Objects: Qualitative
                Differences in Relationships with Imaginary Companions.
PUB DATE   1997-04-00
NOTE   10p.; Paper presented at the Biennial Meeting of the Society
                for Research in Child Development (62nd, Washington, DC,
                April 3-6, 1997).
PUB TYPE   Reports - Research (143) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE   MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS   Birth Order; *Friendship; *Preschool Children; Preschool
                Education; Pretend Play
IDENTIFIERS   *Imaginary Companions; Object Child Relationship

ABSTRACT
        Previous studies of imaginary companions consistently have
found a relation between the incidence of these "fantastical friends" and
children's birth order. Unsuccessful attempts to link imaginary companion
formation to child characteristics may be due to researchers' treatment of
these friends as a form of pretend play rather than as a distinct
relationship for the child. This study investigated the relationship
qualities and form of imaginary companions (invisible friends or personified
objects) to potentially explain why children form these imaginary
relationships. Mothers of 78 children--24 with invisible friends (IF's), 21
with personified objects (PO's), and 33 controls matched on age and
gender--were interviewed. Chi-square analyses replicated the relation between
incidence and birth order, that is, that children with imaginary companions
were more likely to be first born or only children and to have fewer siblings
than children without companions. The distinction between the two forms (IF
and PO) related to different types of relationships and differences in the
children's dramatic play. Findings suggest that in future research, the form
the imaginary companion takes should be distinguished because IF's and PO's
appear to furnish different types of relationships for the child. (HTH)

Running Head: INVISIBLE FRIENDS AND PERSONIFIED OBJECTS

Invisible friends and personified objects: Qualitative differences in

relationships with imaginary companions

Tracy R. Gleason, Anne M. Sebanc, Jennifer McGinley, Willard W. Hartup

Institute of Child Development, University of Minnesota

Abstract

Previous studies of imaginary companions only consistently find a relation between the incidence of these fantastical friends and children's birth order. Unsuccessful attempts to link imaginary companion formation to child characteristics may be due to researchers' treatment of these friends as a form of pretend play rather than as a distinct relationship for the child. This study investigates the relationship qualities and form of imaginary companions (invisible friends or personified objects) to potentially explain why children form these imaginary relationships. Mothers of 78 children (24 with invisible friends (IFs), 21 with personified objects (POs), and 33 controls matched on age and gender) were interviewed. Chi-square analyses replicated the relation between incidence and birth order. The distinction between the two forms (IF and PO) related to different types of relationships and differences in the children's dramatic play. In future research, the form the imaginary companion takes should be distinguished because IFs and POs appear to furnish different types of relationships for the child.

Introduction

Many preschool children have a relationship with an imaginary companion but little empirical research explains why some children form them and others do not. Past research has viewed this phenomenon as simply a complex form of dramatic play or imagination, which could perhaps explain the paucity of child or social environment characteristics that relate to imaginary companion formation. Possibly, ignoring the qualities of these imaginary relationships has obscured the reasons for their formation.

Explanations of imaginary companion formation have been further masked by variations in the criteria researchers use to identify them. Definitions of imaginary companions have varied from including only invisible friends (IFs) to including invisible friends and personified objects (POs), such as dolls or stuffed animals, in the same category. The distinction between IFs and POs is unexplored. The purpose of this study was to examine the role of relationship qualities and form (IF versus PO) in the creation of imaginary companions, and to uncover individual differences between children with and without imaginary companions in terms of child characteristics and propensity for dramatic play.

Methods

Parents were solicited for participation if their child had had an imaginary companion for one month or more, or if their child did not have an imaginary companion but matched on age and gender with a child who did have a companion. Subjects included 78 parents of preschool children (45 girls, 33 boys) from 2 University child care facilities serving mostly white offspring of married couples. Participants were classified into 3 groups according to companion type:

Invisible Friends (IFs): n=24; 12 girls and 12 boys.

Personified Objects (POs): n=21; 15 girls and 6 boys.

Controls (children without imaginary companions): n=33; 18 girls and 15 boys.

Through extended interviews, parents provided information on the children's background, number of imaginary companions, and play. Background included such information as the child's age, gender, birth order, number of siblings, ethnicity, and whether or not the child had friends. For children with imaginary companions, parents responded to questions on the child's relationship with the imaginary companion including behaviors, interactions, and the role the companion played in the child's life. Information was also obtained as to the companion's physical characteristics (e.g., human or animal), and people in the child's life who were acquainted with the companion. Variables on play included parents' ratings of their children as spending little or a great deal of time in fantasy play (3 point scale) and the length of time fantasy play bouts lasted.

Results

<u>Incidence</u>

Approximately 19% of the families willing to participate (N=128) had a child with an invisible companion. Approximately 16% had a child with a personified object.

<u>Demographics and Background Variables</u>

Children with and without imaginary companions did not differ significantly on any demographic or background variables with two related exceptions. Children with imaginary companions were more likely to be first born or only children compared to controls χ^2(6, 78)=15.1, p <.003. Children with imaginary companions had significantly fewer siblings than control children t(76)= -4.07, p <.001. Children with invisible friends versus personified objects

did not differ according to birth order, although a trend indicated that children with invisible friends may be more likely to be firstborns or only children χ^2 (6, 78)=3.40, p <.065.

Invisible Friends versus Personified Objects: Descriptions and Relationship Qualities

IFs and POs differed significantly in several different ways (see Table 1). In terms of their manifestations, IFs were more often human and POs nonhuman (primarily animal) χ^2 (5, 45)=13.76, p=.017. In addition, children with IFs typically had multiple companions, whereas POs were more often single χ^2 (1, 45)=6.79, p=.009.

Relationships and behavior with these different types of companions appeared to vary as well. Relationships with IFs were typically horizontal (e.g., friendships) whereas those with POs were typically vertical (e.g., parent-child relationships) where the child was dominant χ^2 (3, 45)=7.88, p=.049. Children with POs more frequently demonstrated care-taking of their imaginary companions than did children with IFs χ^2 (1, 45)=13.94, p <.0002.

The role the companion played in the child's life differed according to form. IFs were unknown to other children, present in few of the child's social contexts, and did not participate in the child's daily routines. POs were known to other children, present in multiple social contexts and involved in daily routines $p \leq$.05. Lastly, regardless of type, mothers reported little or no conflict in their children's relationships with imaginary companions.

Play-Related Variables

All three groups differed from each other in patterns of frequency of role play. Children with POs were most likely to be reported by their mothers as engaging in a high frequency of role play, and reports of children without imaginary companions were evenly distributed between high, medium and low frequency of role play χ^2 (4, 45)=10.21, p =.037. (See Figure 1.)

NNN

Discussion

Consistent with past research, children with imaginary companions were more likely to be first born or only children and to have fewer siblings than children without companions. Separating the companions into invisible friends and personified objects revealed two patterns of companion formation: invisible friends functioned as peers, in that these relationships were typically horizontal and with humans. Although often present in pairs or groups, invisible friends were prevalent in few aspects of a child's life and were only well-known to people in the child's immediate family and other close adults. Relationships with personified objects, on the other hand, were typically vertical, in that the child nurtured the companion. Frequently stuffed animals, these single companions accompanied the child in varied social contexts and were well-known to most people who knew the child, including other children.

Several implications of imaginary companion distinctions emerged as a result of this research. The findings suggest that caution should be taken before grouping these relationships under the all-encompassing category of 'imaginary companion'. The differential nature of the relationships children have with invisible friends versus personified objects suggests that the two types serve different functions and thus may be different phenomena entirely. The meaning of this distinction is emphasized by the fact that children with personified objects were reported to engage more frequently in role play and symbolic play (e.g., with dolls, stuffed animals, or figures besides their personified object) than children with invisible friends. Perhaps creating a personified object is more closely related to dramatic play, whereas invisible friends provide a solitary forum for the rehearsal of social skills and a controllable relationship.

Table 1

<u>Typical Companion Types</u>

Relationship Quality	Invisible Friend	Personified Object
Configuration	Multiple	Single
Manifestation	Human	Animal
Relationship orientation	Horizontal (e.g., friendship)	Vertical (e.g., caretaking)
Caretaking of companion	Infrequent	Frequent
Situational diversity	Low/Medium	Medium/High
Who knows about companion?	Family, other close adults	Family, close adults, children
Participation in daily routines	No	Yes

Figure 1. Frequency of Role Play

Figure 1. Frequency of Role Play

®
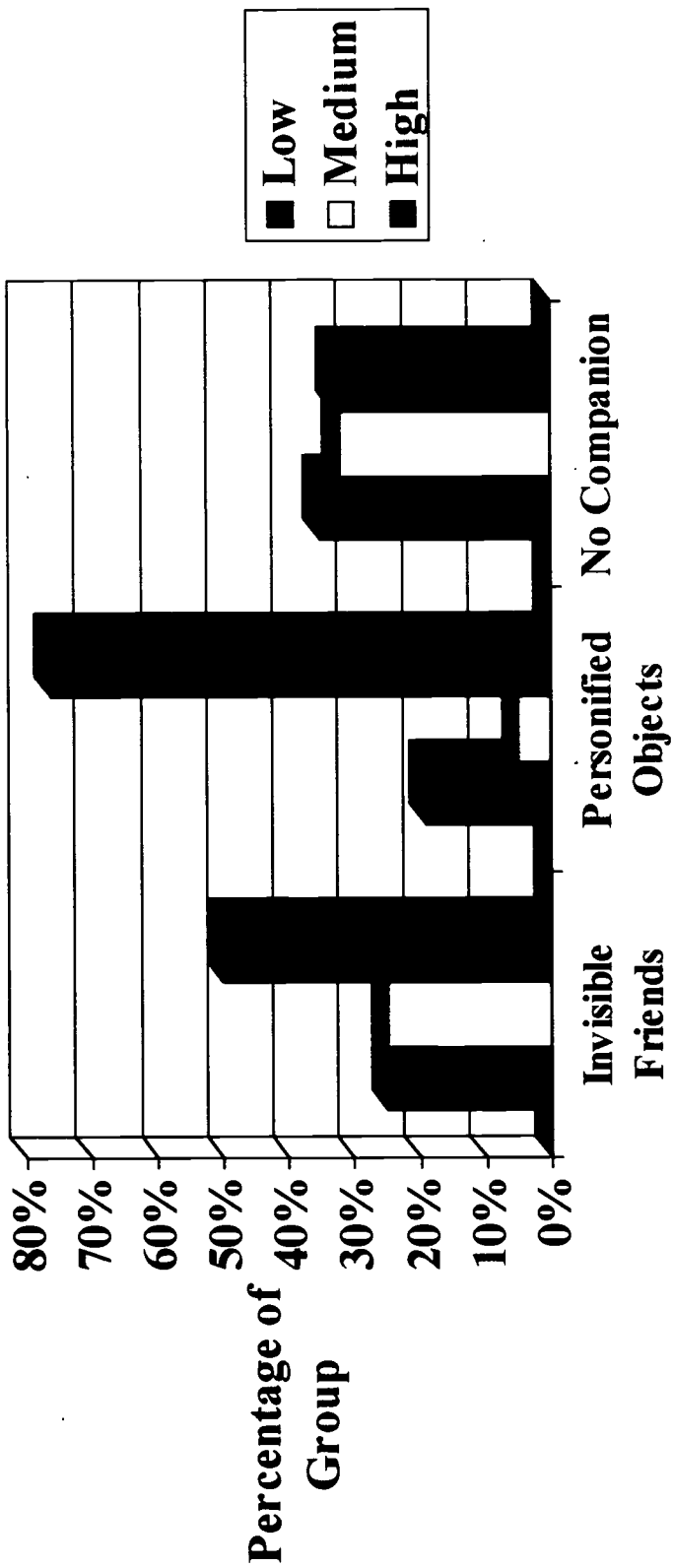
U.S. Department of Education
Office of Educational Research and Improvement (OERI)
Educational Resources Information Center (ERIC)

ERIC

REPRODUCTION RELEASE
(Specific Document)

I. DOCUMENT IDENTIFICATION:

Title: *Invisible friends and personified objects: Qualitative differences in relationships with imaginary companions.*

Author(s): Gleason, Tracy R.; Sebanc, Anne M., McGinley, Jennifer, Hartup, Willard W.

Corporate Source:	Publication Date:

II. REPRODUCTION RELEASE:

In order to disseminate as widely as possible timely and significant materials of interest to the educational community, documents announced in the monthly abstract journal of the ERIC system, *Resources in Education* (RIE), are usually made available to users in microfiche, reproduced paper copy, and electronic/optical media, and sold through the ERIC Document Reproduction Service (EDRS) or other ERIC vendors. Credit is given to the source of each document, and, if reproduction release is granted, one of the following notices is affixed to the document.

If permission is granted to reproduce and disseminate the identified document, please CHECK ONE of the following two options and sign at the bottom of the page.

The sample sticker shown below will be affixed to all **Level 1** documents

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

_____ Sample _____

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

Level 1

☒

Check here
For Level 1 Release:
Permitting reproduction in microfiche (4" x 6" film) or other ERIC archival media (e.g., electronic or optical) *and* paper copy.

The sample sticker shown below will be affixed to all **Level 2** documents

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL IN OTHER THAN PAPER COPY HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

_____ Sample _____

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

Level 2

☐

Check here
For Level 2 Release:
Permitting reproduction in microfiche (4" x 6" film) or other ERIC archival media (e.g., electronic or optical), but *not* in paper copy.

Documents will be processed as indicated provided reproduction quality permits. If permission to reproduce is granted, but neither box is checked, documents will be processed at **Level 1**.

Sign here→ please

Signature: *Tracy R. Gleason*	Printed Name/Position/Title: Tracy R. Gleason
Organization/Address: Institute of Child Development University of Minnesota 51 E. River Road Minneapolis, MN 55455	Telephone: 612 624-6002	FAX: 612 624-6373
	E-Mail Address: gleaf016@tc.umn.edu	Date: 6/3/98

University of Illinois
at Urbana-Champaign

ERIC

Clearinghouse on Elementary and Early Childhood Education
National Parent Information Network

Children's Research Center
51 Gerty Drive
Champaign, IL 61820-7469

217 333-1386   800 583-4135 *toll free*
217 333-3767 *fax*   ericeece@uiuc.edu *e-mail*
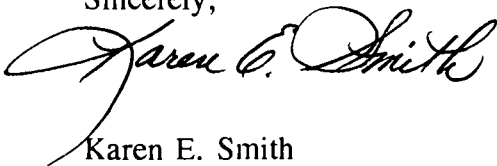
August 22, 1997

Dear Colleague:

After doing a blanket solicitation for papers at the **62nd Biennial Meeting of the Society for Research in Child Development** held in Washington, D.C., April 3-6, 1997, I am now contacting individual presenters, particularly in our scope of early childhood through early adolescence, to consider sending two copies of your presentations for possible inclusion in the **ERIC** database. As you may know, **ERIC (the Educational Resources Information Center)** is a federally-sponsored information system for the field of education. Its main product is the ERIC database, the world's largest source of education information. **The Clearinghouse on Elementary and Early Childhood Education** is one of sixteen subject-specialized clearinghouses making up the ERIC system. We collect and disseminate information relating to all aspects of children's development, care, and education.

Ideally, your paper should be at least eight pages long and not have been published elsewhere at the time of submission. **Announcement in ERIC does not prevent you from publishing your paper elsewhere** because you still retain complete copyright. Your paper will be reviewed and we will let you know within six weeks if it has been accepted.

Please complete and sign the reproduction release on the back of this letter and return it with two copies of your presentation to **ERIC/EECE**. If you have any questions, please call me at (800) 583-4135 or by (e-mail at ksmith5@uiuc.edu). I look forward to hearing from you soon.

Sincerely,

Karen E. Smith
Acquisitions Coordinator

Enclosures