

Benefits of Fantasy Play

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Abstract

This paper explores the benefits of having an imaginary companion throughout child development. There were seven research articles and two online news articles used to complete this research paper. The articles were implemented to find correlations between fantasy play and development. All seven research articles came to similar consensus that fantasy play in early child development is important for creativity and socioemotional development because children learn to be empathetic of other's feelings, beliefs, desires, and intentions. Some methodologies used in the research studies were empirical studies. This paper examines the role of fantasy play on socioemotional development in children, and the long-term effects they hold. Regarding future studies, there should be longitudinal studies implemented to ensure the consistency of the current reports about benefits of fantasy play.

Benefits of Fantasy Play

Imaginary play is a diverse topic that ranges from simple acts of object substitution to elaborate imaginary scenarios. Children that interact in imaginary play are shown to be more creative and have more intricate imaginations than children that reported to not interact in imaginary play. This topic is important because imaginary play and other types of role play is related to social understanding and building knowledge on already obtained schemas. The creation of an imaginary friend helps nourish children's creativity. Beyond the social benefits of imaginary play there are meaningful associations with language development, emotional development, and extraversion in children. Findings reveal that children that participated in imaginary play become skilled in social interaction, confidence building, and cooperativeness. The main reason I am investigating this topic is because growing up I always heard of other kids having an imaginary friend, and I wondered how I could obtain one. Thus, it has me curious of the effects imaginary play has on children's social development and how it can have a positive overall effect on development. In this argument paper, I will discuss the developmental benefits of interacting in fantasy play, gender differences, and different ages. Fantasy play in child development is important for creativity and socioemotional development because children learn to be empathetic of other's feelings, beliefs, desires, and intentions.

Imaginary Companions and Fantasy Play

Pro

Children develop and learn new things with the help of their friends. Imaginary friends are similar to friends children make in school. They come and go, but just like real friends imaginary friends can offer children companionship, entertainment, and bravery to accomplish new tasks (Elias, 2004). Imaginary friends can take numerous forms; a dog, mystical creature, or

even a superhero. Alternatively, children personify physical objects such as a stuffed animal with a personality, or the child may portray a different character than themselves. Research by the New Scientist, 2006 suggests that children who participate in imaginary play develop a theory of mind more quickly than children without an imaginary companion. Children with imaginary friends learn to be more empathetic of other's feelings, beliefs, desires, and intentions. Another benefit of having imaginary companions in early childhood are that these children are more capable of telling more detailed stories and show superb narrative skills. An important contributing factor that helps facilitate the development of imaginary play is parents of children with imaginary companions. Imaginary companions are a vehicle for the imagination and parents frequently comment that their children love listening to stories, and later creating and enacting new scenarios with imaginary companion and later writing stories. In the New Yorker article by (Gopnik, 2002), concerned parents are questioning their three-year-old daughter's (Olivia) imaginary friend Mr. Ravioli. Mr. Ravioli is always too busy to play with Olivia due to meetings, work events, and even has a secretary that sets up appointments for Mr. Ravioli. While the family does live in New York City and has a busy life, the parents question why their child has a friend that can't make time to play with them. The key question that Gopnik wondered was "Why is busyness the stuff our children make their invisible friends from, as country children make theirs from light and sand?" The existence of Mr. Ravioli had emerged Olivia into a paracosm, which curiously reflected her life in the crazy city of New York. Mr. Ravioli, king of being busy, was not a traumatic experience that would inhibit development, but a way of declaring potential independence. Children learn from direct experience and through exploration, so using their imagination they can learn about new situations and assimilate this information to fit their own schemas. Importantly, imaginary companions provide comfort to children who are in a new

uncertain situation. Through play, children are capable of learning emotional regulation and interpret what others expect. Imaginary companions are likely to fulfill multiple purposes depending on different life experiences, and may predict longer-term outcomes.

An interesting aspect that showed up in data (Majors, Baines, 2017) three quarters of children with imaginary companions were girls. In addition, most of the imaginary companions were of the same sex as the child. Gender differences in imaginary companions reflect social and cultural attitudes with boys having less opportunity to express their personality and furthermore any form of imaginary play. Girls aged 3-4 years old were more likely to have imaginary companions, while boys of the same age tended to impersonate characters instead. The preponderance of girls with imaginary companions is due to the purposes which vary according to gender. Girls are more likely to utilize an imaginary companion as someone to parent or take care of. They are connected with the provision of guidance to help with emotional regulation and expression. Children with imaginary companions are also most commonly first-born children or only child. This implies that imaginary companions are brought out to overcome loneliness. While middle children with imaginary companions was still prevalent, an interesting finding was that the companion endured for longer periods of time. As a result, imaginary companions serve different purposes for different children. A common belief with imaginary companions is that children engaged in their imaginations are shyer and introverted than kids who do not interact with imaginary play. However, children engaged in role-play are more familiar with social situations and their pretend play results in confidence-building experiences. Children who engage in frequent pretend play may engage other children into play who also actively pretend play. There are benefits to both private pretend play and social role-play. Private interactions with imaginary companions allow children to gain mastery and obtain confidence, but with

social role-play children learn to compromise, take turns, and empathize with others (Taylor, Sachet, Maring, Mannering, 2013). Furthermore, children with imaginary companions may play with their friend to alleviate the loneliness they feel if they do not have any siblings or other playmates. In addition, children with imaginary companions were more likely to make up stories about mythical beings that does not relate to the imaginary friend, and explain events as magical. Moreover, the reason a child may interact in fantasy play is to assist children better assimilate new knowledge into available schemas by creating a positive, more relatable environment for exploration. In summary, imaginary friends are can stem from multiple factors including gender, family birth order, personality, and creativity (Bouldin, Pratt, 1999).

Con

On the alternative side of the argument, pretend play is not viewed as being a contributing factor to creativity, intelligence, or problem-solving. According to Samarrai, 2012, pretend play has been found to show no correlation to children's mental development. Based on numerous key studies over the past forty years, pretend play is widely considered to be a crucial contributor to socioemotional development. However, a new study by University of Virginia's psychologist Angeline Lillard which reviewed more than 150 studies looked for clear delineated contributions of pretend play, and found little or no correlation of positive evidence of pretend play to children's mental development. According to Lillard, previously presented evidence for the benefits of pretend play to development is derived from flawed research and methodology. She said that testers may have shown bias through previously accounted knowledge that they were testing children who had engaged in adult-directed pretend play. Lillard claims that psychologists often find it difficult to distinguish whether children who participate in pretend play are already creative and imaginative, or if the pretend play is being encouraged by teacher

or parent, actually promotes development. After trying to conduct research using the new differentiation tests, results come up short. It may be due to previous research testing the wrong things; it may well be that future experiments will need to provide sound evidence suggesting the benefits of imaginary companions throughout development, but at this point all of the previous claims are over exaggerated. The last regard made by Lillard was that “if adults enjoy doing it with their children, it provides a happy context for positive adult-child interaction...”

Furthermore, pretend play suggested by Lillard is freedom to make choices and pursue one’s own interests, negotiation with others and physical interactions are valuable throughout development.

If there is to be further understanding of the effects of fantasy play in development, the most important aspect to focus on is testing bias. Past research conducted emphasized how crucial fantasy play is in social, emotional, and cognitive development, but through this article there is clearly no correlation between imaginary play and development. Fantasy play is a common occurrence among developing children, but claiming it is related to higher creativity or intelligence needs further research conducted with proper methodology. In addition, fantasy play reflects emerging independence, but does not reflect children’s capabilities developmentally in the long-term. In contrast to Lillard, fantasy play provides children with a vehicle for imagination. Children are scientific explorers and using imagination allows children to explore a plethora of possibilities, which may be different than their direct experience. Children with imaginary companions are not a homogenous group, but for example, children with special needs or who have been through traumatic events still have imaginary companions. Contrary to research conducted above, parents are reliable measures of imaginary companions because they can observe if the imaginary companion is having a good influence on the child. Parents can also assist with child’s imaginary companion by encouraging their child to try something they are

uncertain about. Imaginary companions also help children regulate their behavior and socialization with a “peer”. Children who have difficulties use the imaginary companion as a tool to overcome difficulties happening in their lives (Majors & Baines, 2017).

Pro.

Contrary to prior belief, research studies have found evidence suggesting that imaginary companions are prevalent longer than previously thought. There are many unanswered questions regarding children’s imaginary companions. In particular, the developmental effects of having a companion and when is the peak age children kept their imaginary companions. Research conducted by (Taylor, Carlson, Maring, Gerow, Charley, 2004) found that 37% of 6 and 7-year-old children still have an imaginary companion. Unlike previous research conducted, children still rely on their imaginary companions throughout school-age years. Parents may not be aware that their children are still engaging in fantasy play because older children are more covert in their play with them. The majority of imaginary companions created by older children are invisible, while younger children at least half are based on props such as stuffed animals. In addition, by the age of 7 there is no sex difference in the creation of imaginary friends. Although preschool boys are more likely to impersonate characters rather than having a companion, by 7-years-old boys become better able to incorporate relationships into fantasy play. Another aspect that previous research did not study was the effect of childhood imaginary companions had on imagination and creativity abilities in adulthood. Adults who reported having an imaginary companion had an advantage with creativity compared to other individuals without an imaginary companion. To study the advantages of having an imaginary companion, (Firth, Alderson-Day, Woods, Fernyhough, 2015) investigated using scene construction, participants imagine and describe a number of fictitious scenes, with the description being coded for levels of complexity

and detail. Results indicated that having an imaginary companion as a child produced more vivid and detailed scene constructions than participants without the companion. Furthermore, bringing it back to how imaginary play leads to a predisposition to engaging fantasy play. Children with imaginary companions report having more vivid daydreams when alone, and felt they could almost see and hear the contents. Unlike children without imaginary companions, children with imaginary companions engaged in higher levels of sporadic fantasy play and were more likely to play solitary games with mythical themes (Bouldin, 2006). Overall, children with imaginary companions are more likely to daydream and participate in fantasy play activities that were related to frequency of imaginative activity and to vividness of fantasy compared to children without an imaginary companion.

Conclusion

Lastly, this paper has been summarizing the benefits of having an imaginary companion throughout development. Findings revealed that children who participated in imaginary play become skilled in social interaction, confidence building, and cooperativeness. Imaginary companions are important for social and emotional development, and purely benefit children unlike prior belief. Children with imaginary companions are actually more likely to be social and confident in interpersonal skills due to learning empathy and compromise from their imaginary companion. Moreover, children that engaged in any type of fantasy play revealed higher levels of creativity, imagination, and confidence. Before writing this paper, I pictured children who had imaginary friends to be more reclusive and introverted, but all of my research proved otherwise. Overall, Fantasy play in child development is important for creativity and socioemotional development because children learn to be empathetic of other's feelings, beliefs, desires, and intentions.

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