

# MIND in the Making

## The Seven Essential Life Skills Every Child Needs

### PRESCRIPTIONS FOR LEARNING

#### Imaginary Friends

Promoting the Life Skill of Making Connections in Preschoolers

Five Strategies That Work in Moving from Managing Children's Behavior to Promoting Life Skills

**Question:** My four year old has an imaginary friend. He insists that we set a place at the table, talk to and open doors for his friend, and even tuck this friend into bed! I know many kids have imaginary friends, but I am worried he is continuing this too far. What should I do?

Many young children have imaginary friends. Your child most likely knows this friend is pretend, but, at his age, he is still exploring the differences between fantasy and reality. Imaginary friends tend to disappear in the elementary school years, when there are more opportunities for him to make friends and explore new interests. By promoting the life skill of Making Connections, you can help him better understand the difference between reality and fantasy while continuing to think creatively.

**Research suggests that children who have imaginary companions are well adjusted and creative. Psychologist Jerome Singer at Yale found that preschoolers who invent companions are less likely to be bored, use more advanced language, concentrate better and are more cooperative.**

- 1. Observe your child at play with his imaginary friend.** There are many reasons why children invent imaginary friends. Some children create their idea of the perfect companion. Others think of a friend who might help them feel safe when they face a challenge, like spending time away from home. These make-believe playmates can help your child problem-solve, too. Once you understand how your child relates to his imaginary friend, it will be easier for you to figure out what this fantasy means in his life and how to respond.
  - Watch how your child interacts with his imaginary friend. What kind of connections is he making through his play?
  - Does he use his friend to help him cope with trying new things?
  - Does he use his friend to take the blame for mistakes he has made or problems or things he has done wrong?
- 2. Make your expectations clear.** Respect your child's feelings about his imaginary friend, but set limits if you feel like this fantasy is taking over. You can acknowledge your child's experience while also making your expectations clear for his behavior in real-life situations.
  - Tell your child what your limits are. For example, if your child insists on his friend sitting in your seat at dinner you can say: "I'm sorry, but that's where I usually sit. Tell your friend to find another spot."
  - Let your child know that he is responsible for his friend. If you say it is time for bed and he insists that you tell his friend, try saying something like: "If your friend didn't hear me, you can let him know it is bedtime."
  - If your child blames his friend for his actions, like breaking something, follow through with the typical consequences. You can say something like: "Tell your friend that it is not okay to break things. The pieces of the toy have to be picked up. Let your friend know that you will do it for him."

**Mitch Resnick, Professor of Learning Research at MIT, thinks that the ability to make unusual connections—to think creatively—is fundamental, not just to individual children’s success, but also to our society’s success. He says:**

*As I look ahead, I think the key to success in the future (and the key to satisfaction in the future) is not just going to be how much we know, or what we know. I think that the ability to think and act creatively will be the key distinguishing quality that will allow people to succeed and be satisfied in their lives.*

**3. Encourage your child’s creativity and imagination.** When your child tells you about his experiences with his imaginary friend, he is making new and unusual connections. This ability is at the core of creativity, a skill that is valuable in school and in life. When you expose your child to many additional ways of expressing his creativity, he can build on his ability to make creative connections. Encourage your child to:

- Draw or paint his ideas. Ask him to create pictures of him and his imaginary friend. You can ask him what he wants to say about his drawings and write it down.
- Ask your child to make up his own stories about his imaginary companion and write down his words.
- Encourage your child to build pretend areas for him and his friend. Suggest that he use things around the house—like pillows, blankets or chairs—to make a special place for his imaginary friend to eat dinner or a bed for his friend to sleep in.

**Kathy Hirsh-Pasek of Temple University talks about the importance of parents’ involvement in children’s imaginary play:**

*When a parent joins in, we call it “guided play,” and it always elevates the level of play. So, parents shouldn’t feel like they have to stay out and let the kids play on their own—they should join in, but they can’t be the boss. They have to follow the child’s lead and talk about the kinds of things that the child is interested in.*

**4. Guide your child’s play.** Part of Making Connections is developing an understanding of how one thing can represent or stand for something else. This skill is used in pretend play and is critical for reading, writing and advanced thinking. Help guide your child’s make-believe play with or without his imaginary companion.

- If your child brings up his imaginary friend, recognize his words: “How nice that your friend went to a party today.” Don’t feel like you have to talk directly to this friend. Your child most likely knows this is pretend and depends on you to stay in the real world.
- Keep your interactions with your child’s friend based in reality. If your child wants you to talk to his friend, say something like: “You can tell your friend my answers.” Let your child know that he can set a place at the table on his own if he wants his friend at dinner.
- Challenge your child’s ideas about his imaginary friend. After he has told you about their adventures, say something like: “It’s amazing how your friend is able to disappear and reappear like that!” This pushes your child to keep using his imagination while thinking about ideas of real and pretend.
- Provide your child with plenty of opportunities to socialize with other children around his age by participating in structured activities and joining in free play so that he has many experiences being with others, not just with his imaginary friend.

**5. Use books, television and movies to talk about similarities and differences between real life and make believe.** Your child’s ability to take a step back and think things through logically calls on another life skill, Critical Thinking, that develops throughout his preschool years. You can use books and age-appropriate movies or television to strengthen this skill and help your child think about what is real and what is pretend.

- Introduce fiction and nonfiction books and child-friendly movies and TV, like nature programs and cartoons. It might be fun to look for picture books about children who also have imaginary friends.
- Talk about similarities and differences and what is real and what is made up: “This book is about a real woman who lived a long time ago, and this book is about a made-up monster in a cave.”
- Ask questions about what you are reading or watching, like: “Could this happen in real life? What makes you think that?”

**Daniel Anderson of the University of Massachusetts at Amherst says it is important that parents use television to trigger conversations:**

*[Parents] can use a television program as a launching point for an important discussion about the world, about the child or about how the child is interpreting the world.*

**These five strategies will promote the life skill of Making Connections and help you move from managing children's behavior to promoting life skills in fun and doable ways.**

**Making Connections** is at the heart of learning—figuring out what's the same and what's different—and sorting these things into categories. Making unusual connections is at the core of creativity. In a world where people can Google for information, it is the people who can see connections who are able to go beyond knowing information to using this information well.

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**Mind in the Making (MITM)**, at The Bezos Family Foundation, is an unprecedented effort to share the science of children's learning with the general public, families and professionals who work with them. Based on *Mind in the Making: The Seven Essential Life Skills Every Child Needs* (HarperCollins, 2010) by Ellen Galinsky, Chief Science Officer at The Bezos Family Foundation, its mission is to promote Executive Function life skills in adults and through them in children in order to keep the fire for learning burning brightly in all of us.

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