

Imaginary Companionships in Childhood and Their Impacts on Child Development

Çocukluk Döneminde Hayali Arkadaşlıklar ve Hayali Arkadaşların Çocuğun Gelişimindeki Yeri

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Abstract

In the early childhood period, the child gets to know himself and the world through play. Although these games are usually set up with a real friend, sometimes they also include imaginary companions. These companions can sometimes be imaginary human characters, and sometimes toys and objects attributed to human characteristics. Children who have imaginary companions may differ from other children in terms of age, gender, birth order and developmental characteristics. In addition, imaginary companionships in early childhood play an important role in children's social development, emotion regulation and their sense of competence. In this study, it is aimed to discuss the characteristics of children with imaginary companions and the effects of imaginary friends on the development of the child.

Keywords: Early childhood, imaginary companion, play, social development, competence

Öz

Erken çocukluk, çocuğun kendini ve dünyayı oyun yoluyla tanıdığı gelişim dönemidir. Çocuk bu dönemde, oyunlarını genellikle gerçek bir arkadaşla kursa da kimi zaman hayali arkadaşlar çocukların oyunlarında gözlemlenen bir durumdur. Hayali arkadaşlar bazen hayali olarak oluşturulmuş insan karakterler, bazen ise insan özellikleri atfedilmiş oyuncak ve nesnelere olabilmektedir. Hayali arkadaşları olan çocuklar, diğer çocuklara göre yaş, cinsiyet, doğum sırası ve gelişimsel özellikler bakımından farklılaşabilmektedir. Ayrıca erken çocukluk döneminde hayali arkadaşlar, çocukların sosyal gelişim, duygu düzenleme ve yeterlilik duygularında önemli bir rol oynamaktadır. Bu çalışmada, hayali arkadaş, hayali arkadaşları olan çocukların ortak özellikleri ve hayali arkadaşın çocuğun gelişimi üzerindeki etkilerine ilişkin alanyazında yer alan bilgilerin taranarak ele alınması amaçlanmıştır.

Anahtar sözcükler: Erken çocukluk, hayali arkadaş, oyun, sosyal gelişim, yeterlik

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THE development concept of friendship first clarified with making behavioral differentiation between children. In the first 2 years of life, children begin to have preferences for specific playmates and differentiate his/her behavior (Howes 1983, Ross and Lollis 1989). These preferences and behaviors are relatively stable (Howes 1983) and these are first reflections of friendship term which is identified as “intimate, reciprocal and dual” (Bukowski ve Hoza 1989). Afterwards, around 4 years old, while children start to use the attribution of “friend”, the concept of friendship emerges verbally (Hartup 1992).

Imaginary friend is a character that sometimes invisible, sometimes become tangible in a form of an animal or a doll, portrayed and behaved as alive by child (Gleason 2017). The research about imaginary companions have begun late 19th century (Vostrovsky 1895). In that times, imaginary companions were assumed as a symptom of mental health disorders. In 1940's, it had attracted attention again in the psychodynamic tradition (Bender and Vogel 1941, Ames and Learned 1946); and this attention have been continuing for years. According to psychoanalytic perspective, imaginary companions are representation of different defence mechanisms. For instance, when children attributed his/her negative characteristics to imaginary companions, this is identified as a kind of reflective defence mechanism (Sperling 1954, Nagera 1969, Bach 1971). However, Taylor (1999), pointed out some problematic perspectives in early studies about imaginary companions. According to Taylor (1999), the research group of the first studies about imaginary companions were selected from the clinics or hospitals where there was a high probability of suffering from psychosocial or emotional problems. This is a limitation in that the research findings do not reflect the general characteristics of all children who are imaginary friends.

The reported rate of children having imaginary companions, differs among many studies. First studies, revealed that 13-31% of children have imaginary companions (Ames and Learned 1946, Bach 1971). However, subsequent researches revealed bigger prevalence rates. Singer and Singer (1992) observed a prevalence of 65% in a sample of 111 children, and Taylor (1999) observed 63% in a sample of 100 children. One explanation of this various prevalence rates is that many research data has been gathered from mothers (Bender and Vogel 1941, Ames and Learned 1946). In her study with children and their parents, Taylor (1999) observed that parents having children at early childhood ages were more aware of children's imaginary friends than parents having children at later ages. According to the research findings, only 20% of the parents of 6 and 7 years old children are aware that their children have imaginary companions.

One explanation of different results on imaginary companions is also comprises different definition of imaginary companions. Some researchers except anthropomorphized toys, toys that is attributed some vital characteristics by children, as imaginary companions, the others doesn't include these in the concept of imaginary companions. Svendsen (1934), added only invisible imaginary friends in the definition of imaginary companions. Singer and Singer (1992), concluded that if they have humankind characteristics, dolls, teddy bears and other objects can be accepted as imaginary companions.

The creation of imaginary companions may consist of humans, animals, spirits, objects, creatures and also they can evolve in many shapes and forms (Gleason 2017). Mostly, transition objects like blankets or teddy bears can be transformed into objects that children reflect his/her personality, emotion and choices on those (Gleason et al. 2000). Similarly, imaginary companions can be consist of fictional characters, real friends or they can be completely product of children's imaginations. Gleason et al. (2000) revealed that the relationships with invisible characters are mostly social and friendly, while relationships with personified objects are in a nutritious structure. In the same study, mothers stated that they observe the relationship with personified objects after acquiring a toy, while they observe the relationship with invisible characters when there is a need of intimate contact. In this study, it is aimed to discuss the common characteristics of children who have imaginary companions and the effects of imaginary companions on the child's development.

Common characteristics of children who have imaginary companions

Considering the functions of the concept of friendship in the early childhood period, we can deduce that play is a language for the child in this period. Children get to know life through play, interpret what they learn and observe, and acquire many skills through play. Therefore, considering the importance of play on the child's development, reviewing the common characteristics of children who have imaginary companions will help to understand the place of imaginary friendships in the child's development.

The common characteristics of children who have imaginary companions in early childhood are frequently discussed in the research literature on the concept of imaginary companions. According to Seiffge-Krenke (2000) there are 4 possible explanations about children who have imaginary companions: the giftedness hypothesis, the deficit hypothesis, narcissism hypothesis and impulse control hypothesis. According to giftedness hypothesis, children who have imaginary companions are more creative than the other children. The deficit hypothesis claims that imaginary companions may help children to compensates emotions like loneliness and neglect which occurs around the environment of the child. Narcissism hypothesis suggests that children who have imaginary companions are reluctant to give up the egocentrism in early childhood due to various narcissistic blows. The impulse control hypothesis assumes that imaginary companions serve as ego support in a transition phase on the path to autonomy and self-regulation.

Demographic characteristics

Various studies conclude different results about imaginary companions. Beside the studies which claim imaginary companions are most frequent around for years (Taylor 1999), other studies reveal that that imaginary companions are seen equally frequently during the school years (Hurlock and Burstein 1932). Singer and Singer (1992), argued that imaginary companions disappear basically between the ages of six and eight. However, they claimed that the presence of imaginary companions have been continuing in the feelings

and thoughts of the person throughout the life. Taylor et al. (2004) found that 65% of the children had an imaginary companion before the age of seven. However, there are examples of imaginary companions in their further development periods (Taylor et al. 2010).

A number of gender differences have emerged in previous studies on imaginary friendships. Many studies have shown that girls are more likely to have imaginary companions (e.g. Taylor 1999). It is also known that boys and girls differentiate in terms of their play with imaginary companions (Taylor 1999). More often than girls, boys imitate cartoon or movie characters and take on hero roles like “Superman” rather than socializing with their imaginary friends.

A gender difference that emerged in the study of Singer and Singer (1992) is that boys have more animal imaginary friends than girls, and girls have more human imitation playmates. Besides, girls are more likely to have opposite sex imaginary friends. The results revealed that 42% of girls and 13% of boys have opposite sex imaginary companions. In another study, it has found that while girls’ imaginary companions are mostly less competent than them, boys have imaginary companions that are admired and idealized (Harter and Chao 1992). Imaginary companions of girls have weaker characteristics but boys’ imaginary companions are kind of hero or idols. According to authors, this addresses the differences in genders in terms of competence.

According the studies about family dynamics and birth order in the family of children who have imaginary companions, in addition to only children, first-born children have imaginary companions to a greater extent (Hurlock and Burstein 1932, Bouldin and Pratt 1999, Taylor 1999, Gleason et al. 2000). On the other hand, most of these studies gathered information from parent report. For this reason, an alternative explanation is that parents are more likely to observe first born child’s imaginary companions or younger siblings kept this situation more confidential than elders.

Developmental characteristics

There are studies in the literature which shows that imaginary companions support cognitive development of children. For example, it has known that in early childhood period, theory of mind develops better in children who have imaginary companions (Taylor and Carlson 1997). It is thought that these children, who have imaginary friends, try to understand the minds of other people through the games they play with their imaginary companions.

Studies revealed that the children who have imaginary companions are much more talented and creative (Myers 1979, Singer ve Singer 1992). Myers (1979) presented six case studies, which shows that individuals who have imaginary companions in childhood display creative capacities as adults, and in some cases imaginary friends inspire adult creativity in different ways. Somers and Yawkey (1984) provided detailed examples of how children’s intellectual and creative development can benefit from having imaginary companions. They argued that imaginary companions help children discover creative thinking. By playing with imaginary companions, children experience new ways of communication. According to Somers and Yawkey (1984), imaginary companions encourage originality in the child’s ideas and thought system.

Smith and Carlsson (1990) also suggested that imaginary friends are a sign of creative potential. However, there are only few studies about this issue. In a study conducted with 800 high school students, a relationship was found between the creativity of adolescents and the situation of having imaginary friends in childhood, especially in terms of literary creativity (Schaefer 1969).

Creativity, corresponds to productive way of experiencing reality, including the self-perception of the subject (Hoff and Carlsson 2002). This definition highlights the way of experience and existence of individual. Other definitions, put emphasis on the product aspect of creativity which claims that creativity should be result in useful products (Martindale 1989). By looking at the issue from this perspective, it can be concluded that imaginary companions are new and beneficial products for children.

Importance of imaginary friends on child's development

To understand why and how imaginary friends affect children's development, it is important to review the functions of these interactions in a child's life.

Imaginary companions as a tool of social support and competence

Although imaginary companions can not be accepted as real relationship partner, literature points out some of common benefits which exist in real companion relationship. In fact, their resemblance to real friends, led parents or early childhood experts to think that children create imaginary friends because they do not have real friends (Taylor 1999). There are different comments about the importance of imaginary companions in the social development of the child. Some researches suggest that children who have imaginary companions are not as socially competent as children without such companions (Harter and Chao 1992, Bouldin and Pratt 1999). Especially in early studies, children who have imaginary companions were described as shy and socially inadequate (Ames and Learned 1946).

On the other hand, children with imaginary companions have common characteristics with other children in regard to being accepted by their peers (Gleason 2004) and the number of playmates they have (Manosevitz et al. 1973). In general, the children with and without imaginary companions are mostly similar in terms of peer relationships (Gleason 2004). In the study conducted by Singer and Singer (1992), it had been observed that children with imaginary companions show more positive sensuality and less aggression during play. Another study (Manosevitz et al. 1973), revealed that children with imaginary companions were reported to be happier and more in touched verbally during daily activities by their parents. In this study, another remarkable result points out that when real playmates show up, children stop playing with the imaginary companions.

It has been suggested that primary function of imaginary companions in early childhood is constructing intimate relationship which is essential for the concept of friendship (Masih 1978, Howes 1996, Taylor 1999). In addition to this, in the research conducted with four years children, it had been observed that children with imaginary companions have similar characteristics with children without imaginary companions in terms of social judgement and

the balance of power in the relationships. Also, as it is in the relationship with real playmates, imaginary companions do not always obey the wishes of their creators: children imagine conflicts with them, sometimes they are afraid of or angry with imaginary companions (Taylor 1999). These findings highlight the importance of investigating the relationship judgments children have with imaginary friends, the function of these friends, and that these friendships can potentially provide insight into children's concepts of friendship.

Another assumption regarding the social function of imaginary companions is that imaginary companions ensure social experience in children's life (Henricks 2015). From this point of view, the imaginary friend can be accepted as a tool through which the child has the opportunity to experience active self-realization. Besides, in his/her games with imaginary friends, the child creates and experiences all kinds of emotions - even negative emotions - in a context that can be more easily regulated than in real life.

Vygotsky's (1967) concept of pretend play represents the theoretical mechanism of children's self-actualization and self-exploration. In this perspective, play with imaginary companions can be conceptualized as a tool for exploring the natural construct and function of social relationships and related emotions in the safe boundaries of the play context. In the relationship with imaginary companions, children experience the rules exist in social relationships and internalizing them. In another words, imaginary companions provide the simulation of relationship which children enables to encounter and learn interpersonal skills and experiences.

The perspective of imaginary companions as a social context in which children can search relationship skills and context helps to explain why some children create idealized imaginary companions and others create challenging characters. Imaginary companions who have ideal characteristics help children satisfy their needs for friendship and reassurance (Gleason 2017). For instance in a study, a 4-year-old participant created an invisible version of Danny, his best friend at school. The mother of the child stated that the reason of occurrence of imaginary companion is related to be only child, the love to real Danny and the desire of playing much more with Danny. Besides, mother stated that although her child and real Dany sometimes experienced conflicts in their plays, imaginary Danny was generally willing to acknowledge his son's desires (Gleason et al. 2000). In this situation, imaginary companions represent the unconditional acceptance and limitless flexibility. The aim of this imaginary context is both constructing social relationships and reducing the effort of maintaining a real social relationship (Gleason 2017).

Other studies point out that through imaginary companions children have a chance to explore the negative aspects of relationships. In his observation about his daughter Olivia's relationship with her imaginary companion named Charli Ravioli, Gopnik (2002) reported that the most remarkable characteristics of Charlie was his inaccessibility. No matter how much Olivia wanted to see Charlie, they barely meet and there was a theme of disappointment in their play which includes missed calls. Gopnik evaluated this as a reflection of hurried life of Olivia's parents. Olivia created a social context in order to understand inaccessibility in social interaction conditions and emotions in this dissatisfied relationship.

Imaginary companions as a tool of emotion regulation

Since imaginary companions provide opportunities for all kinds of interpersonal experiences such as commitment, cooperation, empathy and conflict, the relationship between the child and their imaginary companions are seen as a resource not only for the details of interpersonal interaction but also for different developmental areas (Gleason 2013). Imaginary companions allow some children to recognize challenging social experiences in which they try to explore social relationships without the negative emotions that arise in their real relationships. Besides, it has known that after the acquisition of emotion regulation and social skills the relationships with imaginary companions are terminated (Kastenbaum and Fox 2007).

In cases where imaginary companions reject the child's ideas, dealing with the emotional difficulties created by this compelling situation appears as a theme in the game. According to Gleason and Kalpidou (2014), children who have an equal friendship relationship with their imaginary companions are emotionally more mature and more developed in terms of effective coping mechanisms than children who have imaginary companions who are dependent on them. Although this finding does not definitively show that the creation of an imaginary companions result in better emotional coping strategies, it suggests a positive correlation between imaginary companions and emotion regulation skills.

In another study (Bouldin and Pratt 2002), which showed that children with imaginary companions differ in emotion regulation compared to other children without any imaginary companions, it has been observed that children with imaginary companions, especially during school period, were anxious in their social relationships. It has been found that these children have a high anxiety focus compared to their friends. It has been suggested that children with imaginary companions are more anxious about meeting the expectations of others in social relationships. This finding was later supported by the fact that children with imaginary companions in middle childhood showed more social anxiety than those without imaginary friends (Shavel-Jessop and Segal 2005). When these findings are taken together, one can assume that playing with imaginary companion serve as a resource for the child in the management of negative emotions that arise in social interactions.

Burbach et al. (2014) in a qualitative study about imaginary companions, a child between the ages of 5-10 defines their imaginary friend as "a basis in cases where they cannot establish a relationship in the social environment" and "a supportive tool in intense loneliness". In addition, the same study revealed the function of imaginary companions to regulate negative emotions in cases of negative childhood experiences such as abuse and neglect.

Relationships with imaginary companions in early childhood can also be emotion regulation tool for children in situations where various negative emotions may occur, such as family conflict, loss of a mother, and emotional deficiency. In the clinical study of the author, it was observed that the imaginary friend of the 3-year-old boy, described as an adult and a woman, only appeared when he is with his caretaker. His imaginary friend goes "his

own house” when he was with his mother. As in this example, the child can benefit from the imaginary friend in order to manage the negative emotions in the absence of the mother. In this sense, the healing effect of the imaginary friend on the negative emotions of the child can be mentioned.

Role of imaginary companions on dependency and autonomy conflict

In many theories and perspectives, it has been emphasized that the game represents an important tool through which the child can examine competence and mastery issues (Rubin et al. 1983). The game provides a symbolic base where children can enact themes of mastery or competence that allow them to develop new skills or to compensate for skills they haven't yet demonstrated in the real world. Also, White (1959) defined the game as “impact motivation” which is the desire of interacting competently with one's world. Caplan and Caplan (1973) gave special emphasis on the fact that playing with imaginary companions provides opportunities to counter helplessness by creating an imaginary world in which the child has complete control.

In the first studies about children with imaginary companions, the compensation role of imaginary friends on child's lack of competence had been emphasized. For instance, Bach (1971) stated that the emergence of imaginary companions reflects the child's struggle to have autonomy toward his/her parents. In a case reported by Murphy (1962), it had found that imaginary friend helps children being more powerful and courageous and coping with the difficulties of first days in kindergarten. Wickes (1966) observed that the child with poor vision had imaginary companion who doesn't need to wear glasses and he concluded that in this situation imaginary companions represents a tool for competence in which child feels weak. In another case told by Wickes, imaginary companion helped children compensating his inadequacy on sportive activities.

Benson and Pryor (1973), stated that children frequently attribute their imaginary companions that evoke conversation with mirror in “Snow White” story. In this case, children apply their imaginary companions for refreshing their self-confidence and taking support for reflecting their self-image. For authors, by this way imaginary companions nurture the healthy narcissism and take part in strengthening the child's emerging self-confidence.

Harter and Chao (1992) revealed that children with imaginary companions differ from children without imaginary companions in terms of competence level. According to teacher ratings, children with imaginary companions are less competent and popular in terms of cognitive competence, physical competence and peer acceptance. The research also examined the superiority or weakness of imaginary companions in terms of the competence. When the drawings of children were evaluated it had been observed that some children created highly competent imaginary friends and others created less competent and needed to be educated and raised characters. Besides, the research revealed that boys created physically talented imaginary friends and girls created less competent and needy characters. In the study, it has

been observed that girls establish relationships with their imaginary companions based on teaching and interest. Thus, while the general findings suggest that imaginary companions may represent compensatory mechanisms for overcoming competence-related issues, the nature of the types of friends constructed by boys and girls stands in striking contrast.

Avcı (2012) pointed out that the imaginary friend named Adıgüzel, created by Metin in Ethem Baran's novel "Half", is a tool that the creative character uses to gain approval and courage. According to Avcı (2012), Adıgüzel is an imaginary companion who is older than Metin, guides him while being friends of him and encourages him in writing skill. In addition, it is seen that Metin, who is the creator of the imaginary companion, attributes characteristics to Adıgüzel regarding negative childhood experiences. Adıgüzel grew up in a negative family environment, in the emotional deprivation of the mother and father, and now as a "mature" character, he has become the guide of Metin. While Metin is an introverted character with inadequate social skills, Adıgüzel is an extrovert, courageous and altruistic character in the context of social relations. As can be seen in this example, imaginary companions play a role in autonomy and competence, with their attributes loaded according to the emotional needs of the creator.

These explanations in the literature state that the basic function of creating an imaginary companion is to help the child cope with issues involving mastery and competence. Therefore, these studies suggest that the imaginary companions can psychologically help the child overcome or compensate for feelings of inadequacy.

Conclusion

Play has a very important role on a child's development in early childhood. Besides, the concept of play is not limited to situations where more than one partner is present. Rather, the human imagination capacity provides a context in which to meet the many benefits of real social games. At this point, imaginary companions appear in the child's life and become important for the child's development. In some cases, an imaginary companion may be more facilitator than a real friend in terms of some characteristics. Adapting the imaginary companion's characteristics to the needs of the child provides this. Imaginary companions can facilitate the development of social competence, especially through the acquisition of interpersonal skills that are useful in adulthood, such as emotion regulation, cooperation, and perspective taking. In addition, children create social experience environments and develop their sense of competence with these games. Imaginary companions create a context to recognize real social roles and explore aspects of social hierarchy, and act as a tool to shift negative emotions into a truly imaginary relationship. To conclude, a real play partner is not necessary to set up social game for a child with adequate cognitive skills. In addition, it can be said that children's game with imaginary companions positively affects their social relationships and self-development.

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