

How imaginary friends from our childhood can continue to affect us as adults

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Credit: Mary Nikitina from Pexels

Crabby crab is my four-year-old son Fisher's imaginary friend. Crabby appeared on a holiday in Norway by scuttling out of his ear after a night of tears from an earache. Like other childhood imaginary friends,

Crabby should be an indication that Fisher's mind is growing and developing positively. Indeed, research shows that invisible companions can help boost children's social skills.

But what happens when [children](#) grow up and their imaginary friends disappear? Will Crabby have influenced Fisher into adolescence or adulthood? And what if you continue to have imaginary friends as an adult? The [vast majority of the research](#) on imaginary friends looks at [young children](#) as this is the time when these playmates are most likely to appear. But researchers have started looking into the impact of imaginary childhood friends in adolescence and adulthood.

Imaginary friends in childhood [are classified](#) as invisible beings that a child gives a mind or personality to and plays with for over three months.

It is very rare that adults have imaginary companions. But there are a few different types of behaviour that could be considered a form of imaginary friendship. For example, adult authors can be seen as prolific creators of imaginary friends in the form of characters. That's because their characters [have personalities and minds of their own](#), and authors often report their characters leading the writing rather than vice versa. Tulpas, [objects created](#) through spiritual or mental powers in mysticism, are also a sort of imaginary friend.

Social skills in adolescence

Research has shown that the positive effects of having imaginary friends as a child continue into adulthood. Adolescents who remember their imaginary playmates have been found to use [more active coping styles](#), such as seeking advice from loved ones rather than bottling things up inside, like their peers. Even adolescents with behavioural problems who had imaginary friends as children have been found to [have better coping skills](#) and more positive adjustment through the [teenage years](#).

Scientists think this could be because these teens have been able to supplement their social world with imagination rather than choosing to be involved in relationships with more difficult classmates. It could also be because the imaginary friends help to alleviate these adolescents' loneliness.

These teens are also more likely to [seek out social connections](#). Some older research suggests that such adolescents have higher levels of psychological distress than their peers who do not remember having imaginary playmates. But the majority of research being done points to mainly positive outcomes. Current research being done now by my student, [Tori Watson](#), is taking this evidence and looking at how adolescents who report having imaginary friends as children deal with bullying at school. We suspect that teens who remember their imaginary friends will be better at dealing with bullying.

Creativity and hallucinations

Adults who had imaginary friends, meanwhile, report that [they are more creative and imaginative](#) than those who did not. We also know that they are [better at describing a scene](#) that they have constructed in their imagination. This could be because they were more imaginative to start with and/or that playing with an imaginary friend in childhood helped boost such capabilities.

There are also other discrepancies in how adults see and interact with the world around them that scientists think stems from the use of imagination when playing with an invisible [friend](#) as a child. For example, [adults](#) who had imaginary friends [talk to themselves more](#). This is thought to be because they have grown up being more comfortable talking when no one else real is around. Interestingly, research has shown that talking to yourself can be a sign of high cognitive functioning and creativity.

Adults who had imaginary companions as children may become used to seeing things that aren't really there and explaining them to people. For this reason, imaginary friends have been looked at as a type of hallucination that is experienced by normally developing children. Importantly, the children know that these friends [aren't actually real](#). Adults similarly can have hallucination experiences when going in or coming out of a deep sleep. We sometimes also see or hear things that aren't there, for example in the corner of our eye – knowing it's our mind playing tricks on us.

My team and I recently investigated whether people who had imaginary friends as children also report more such hallucination experiences. Interestingly, our study, [published in Psychiatry Research](#), found that this actually is the case. Importantly, these individuals were not a greater risk of developing psychosis or schizophrenia, they were just more likely to have common forms of hallucinations. We know that because we also tested other perceptual experiences like unusual thoughts and ideas as well as symptoms of depression. These experiences, in combination with more intense hallucinations, can put people at higher risk of developing schizophrenia.

But people who had had imaginary friends didn't show this combination of symptoms. There was one exception, though – individuals who had also suffered child abuse. These people were more likely to have both unusual thoughts and ideas, and depression, possibly making them more vulnerable to psychosis. It's unclear whether this link has got anything to do with imaginary friends or whether it is all down to the trauma of having suffered child abuse, with imaginary friends instead playing a comforting role.

So while we know a lot about childhood imaginary friends such as Crabby Crab, and the [positive effects](#) they can have, there is still a lot to learn about imaginary friends and how our childhood experiences with

them might make us see the world differently.

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