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THE IMAGINARY COMPANION AND THE SOUNDS OF MOTHERING:
THE CASE FOR AN AUDITORY TRANSITIONAL OBJECT

City University of New York

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THE IMAGINARY COMPANION AND THE SOUNDS OF MOTHERING:

THE CASE FOR AN AUDITORY TRANSITIONAL OBJECT

by

BARBARA B. THACHER

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This manuscript has been read and accepted for the Graduate Faculty in Psychology in satisfaction of the dissertation requirement for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy.

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I. Introduction

The following paper is concerned with the results of research about one aspect of the early childhood phenomenon of the imaginary companion. It proposes that the imaginary companion be looked at in a new theoretical light as a form of transitional phenomenon (Winnicott, 1953) which has its roots in the auditory experience of being mothered. The paper contains a general review of the literature about imaginary companions, a discussion of the theoretical notions involved in conceptualizing an imaginary companion in this way, and the results of an exploratory interview study in which 18 mothers of children with imaginary companions were asked to talk about these children and their own parenting practices. It was anticipated that these mothers would emerge as very verbal parents who were highly invested in these children's verbal development, that they would characterize themselves as essentially "talking caretakers," and that the early, close-to-mother experiences of these children would emerge as having been richly, and perhaps unusually, filled with the "sounds of mothering." In general, these expectations were well confirmed.

II. The Review of the Literature

Parents, educators, psychologists, sociologists, and psychoanalysts have all contributed to the literature about the childhood imaginary companion. Some have studied the children who develop these imaginary friends; some have focused on the fantasied creatures themselves; others have chosen to consider their metapsychological significance. In the following section an attempt is made to review the previous contributions to the literature from these varied quarters.

Definitions of the Phenomenon

Svendsen (1934) defined the imaginary companion as follows: "an invisible character, named and referred to in conversation with other persons or played with directly for a period of time, at least several months, having an air of reality for the child, but no apparent objective basis. This excludes that type of imaginative play in which an object is personified, or in which the child himself assumes the role of some person in the environment (p.988)." As an example she cites a child who shortly before her second birthday began referring to "Tagar", an imaginary character whom she led around on an invisible string. Tagar slept and had food kept for it under the radiator and it was described as especially fond of ice cream, just like its owner. "Berrie" and "Auntie" followed Tagar when the child was about 3½. She set places for them at the table, recounted their exploits to her father at dinner, and asked them if they'd had "enough", although they were never given real food. While the child was sometimes punished, Berrie and Auntie "never" were and never did anything wrong. They often accompanied her on outings with her parents.

An example of a rather different sort of imaginary companion is given by Nagera (1969) in the form of "Pupu", the creation of a 2-year-old girl named Maritza. Pupu, as his name suggests, was often naughty. He said bad words, he toppled Maritza's block buildings, he needed and demanded things, and Maritza's mother was often called upon to see to his needs. "Laughing Tiger", the invisible companion of Selma Fraiberg's (1959) niece, Jannie, and Marécage, the imaginary friend of Piaget's (1962) daughter Jacqueline afford two other well-known examples and the literature is replete with others. (See especially Nagera, 1969; Murphy, 1962; Munroe, 1894; Nice, 1919; and Bach, 1971 for others.)

Svendsen's (1934) definition cited above excludes the imaginary character who is neither talked about nor played with openly but who remains part of a private fantasy world. Ames and Learned (1946) and Nagera (1969) have noted that the older the child the more likely his imaginary companion is to be kept secret. Nagera in particular makes a case for distinguishing between the openly verbalized fantasy playmates of the pre-schooler and the private companions of latency-age and older individuals, suggesting the latter are more likely to be associated with structuralized internal conflict and psychopathology. His argument is discussed further below. It should be noted, however, in considering the review of the literature that writers who have studied the phenomenon by interviewing older children and/or adults about their childhood recollections (Jersild, Markey, and Jersild, 1933; Singer, 1973; Hurlock and Burstein, 1932; and Shaefer, 1969) usually do not make this distinction.

Characteristics of the Imaginary Companion

Every writer who has described the behavior of a child with his imaginary companion has recognized that the invisible creature is a highly idiosyncratic creation. While no two companions are ever quite alike and while no two children relate to their companions in identical fashion, there are a number of observations which have been made about the class of imaginary companions in general and about their features in relation to the children who create them in particular. Some of these are summarized below.

Identity of the Companion: All writers have noted that a variety of beings--human, animal, mythical - and even occasionally objects--may be cast in the role of imaginary companion. Many children have more than one companion at a time and/or a succession of companions who may differ in type. Although the figures reported vary, the majority of imaginary companions appear to be human: 79% according to Jersild, Markey and Jersild (1933); 75% according to Ames and Learned (1946); 89% according to Manosevitz, Prentice, and Wilson (1973). Ames and Learned (1946) are the only investigators who have attempted to draw a distinction between human and animal imaginary companions, and they have suggested that there is a sequential relationship whereby the animal companions develop earlier than human ones. This interesting idea has not received any further attention to date.

"Reality" of the Companion: There are numerous accounts in the literature of children whose imaginary companions appear to be so "real" that there are screams of protest if the companion is mis-

treated or if space is not made for him at the table or in the family car. Harvey (1918) described these playmates as "not merely vivid ideas, or imaginings, but actual visual and auditory projections (which) can be seen and heard as vividly as if they are living children (p.3)." Most later writers mention the strikingly real quality which some, though not all, of these creations possess (Jersild et al., 1933; Hurlock and Burstein, 1932; Svendsen, 1934; Ames and Learned, 1946). In Svendsen's study, 33 of the 40 companions were conceived of as occupying space; Manosevitz et al. (1973) report that this was true for 47% of the companions in their study. Griffiths (1935) seems to be the only writer who has taken the position that "a child may create for himself the idea of an imaginary companion and may deliberately pretend that such a person is present, but it does not necessarily follow that he sees the companion or has images or hallucinations accompanying this experience (p.228)."

A case reported in a recent paper by Benson and Pryor (1973) seems to have implications for the consideration of how "real" an imaginary companion may be for the child:

Grandfather suggested to Lynn (aged 4) that she have Nosey (her imaginary companion) close the garage door. She agreeably did as he asked. Unbeknownst to her, Grandfather activated a remote-control mechanism in his car. Lynn's eyes widened in amazement as she watched the door really close. About two weeks later, after the family had returned home, mother became aware that Lynn no longer was playing with Nosey. When she inquired about this, Lynn told her that Nosey was gone. He had remained at her grandparents to "open and close the door. Grandmother

and Grandfather needed Nosey for the garage." From this point onward, Nosey was never again Lynn's companion (p.459).¹

This case suggests that the "reality" of the companion for the child is of a very special nature, that perhaps it lies somewhere between illusion and what we think of as reality, and that it is destroyed when taken out of the hands of the child's control.

Sex of the Companion: In the early reports of imaginary companions it is stated that same-sex companions are preferred (Vostrovsky, 1895; Hurlock and Burstein, 1932; Jersild et al., 1933; Svendsen, 1934), although it is interesting to note that this appears to be true by smaller and smaller margins as one considers these findings chronologically. Ames and Learned (1946) report that most of their sample had companions of both sexes, that several children with a single companion had chosen one of the opposite sex, and that this tendency to choose a companion of the opposite sex was more marked among girls (8:3). This finding was supported in a more recent study too where boys were found likely to have same-sex companions significantly more often than girls ($p < .01$) (Manosevitz et al., 1973).

¹I know of no other case like this which has been reported in the literature, but a similar one has recently been brought to me attention in a conversation with Dr. Frank Berchenko, a personal acquaintance. The child in question, also a little girl, had three companions to whom she used to talk through the intercom of her apartment. The intercom had one "dead" button which was always used for this purpose. On one occasion the wrong button was pushed and, instead of the usual silence during which the companions would speak, the voice of the doorman was heard. In this case too, the companions subsequently disappeared.

Age of the Companion: There is no general agreement about the patterning of ages associated with imaginary companions. Some authors have suggested that they are usually the same age as the child (Harvey, 1918; Svendsen, 1934); some that they are rarely younger and often older (Vostrovsky, 1895; Hurlock and Burstein, 1932); one that nearly half of them are of indeterminate age (Manosevitz et al., 1973). Ames and Learned's (1946) sample included children with companions who were contemporary, older, and younger, and from their observations of this fact and of the ages of the children themselves they formulated an interesting hypothesis:

A clear developmental trend suggests itself in this respect. It appears that the very youngest children to have imaginary companions have companions older than themselves. Later they have contemporaries. Still later they have babies or children younger than themselves (p.155).

Names of Companions: Most authors include examples which illustrate the rich variety of names which have been given to imaginary companions. The majority appear to receive ordinary names (Vostrovsky, 1895; Svendsen, 1934; Ames and Learned, 1946; Manosevitz et al., 1973), but there is always a distinct minority in every group whose names seem to be idiosyncratic creations of a highly fanciful nature. The sources of the names are frequently unknown, but when they are recognized they are believed to be drawn from the names of significant people, story books, games, pleasant-sounding nonsense words, and recently TV (Svendsen, 1934; Manosevitz et al., 1973). Psychoanalytic writers who have contributed deeper analyses of individual cases have often been able to assign more particular kinds of significance to the names (Sperling, 1954; Nagera, 1969; Bach,

1971); some of these will be discussed below.

Roles which the Companion Plays: The literature is replete with anecdotal material illustrating the ways in which children may use their imaginary companions. Nagera (1969) gives a very complete accounting of these, and due to the generality of his observations, his "list" is reproduced here and references to all others are omitted. More complete discussion of the significance of these functions is deferred to a later section of the paper. Imaginary companions may serve as 1) a superego auxiliary by 'reminding' the child of what he 'ought' to do; 2) a "vehicle for the discharge of impulses which are no longer acceptable to the child;" 3) a scapegoat whom the child may blame and/or punish for his own misdeeds; 4) a means of "prolonging feelings of omnipotence and control;" 5) an impersonation of primitive ego ideals; and, occasionally, 6) a "weapon for defiance and provocation" (Nagera, 1969, pp.175-182).

Prevalence of the Phenomenon

Estimates of the frequency of imaginary companions have varied widely. In the early literature, prior to the use of systematic sampling techniques, they range from 6% (Harvey, 1918) to nearly 100% (Kirkpatrick, 1920). The figures given in later studies tend to fall into a narrower range; but the variety of methodologies used, the different ages of children studied, and--most significantly--the fact that the term 'imaginary companion' has rarely been defined or treated consistently are undoubtedly responsible for the discrepancies which remain.

In a questionnaire survey of high school students (Hurlock and Burstein, 1932) 21% of the girls and 23% of the boys reported having had imaginary companions sometime during childhood. When younger children were interviewed, the incidence was found to be slightly higher, at 35% (Jersild et al., 1933). The lowest figures are reported in those studies where both children and parents were interviewed: Ames and Learned (1946) reported an incidence of 20% and Svendsen (1934), 13.4%. Svendsen believed the much lower figure which emerged in her study was to be explained by the fact that her study was alone in defining the imaginary companion as a phenomenon of "at least several months' duration." Manosevitz et al.'s study (1973), in which parents of 3- to 5-year-old children were mailed questionnaires, reported that 28% of those responding had a child with an imaginary companion. A recent popular article in Psychology Today, (Pines, 1978) writes of recent as-yet unpublished research by J. L. and D. G. Singer and J. Caldeira in which, of the children they studied, "65%, according to the children, or, 55%, according to their parents" had imaginary playmates.

Ages at Which Imaginary Companions Appear and Disappear

Almost all writers have agreed that imaginary companions may appear very early in a child's life and that the exact occasion of their first appearance is often unknown. Vostrovsky (1895) noted that they arose "anytime from the first to the thirteenth year of life (p.396)." The more usual assignment has been to the pre-school years between 2 and 5; Kirkpatrick (1920) stressed the third year; Svendsen (1934) gave a median age of 2.5 with an upper limit of 6 for her sample;

Ames and Learned (1946) dated the onset to 36-42 months, with a peak at 42 months; Gesell and Ilg include the imaginary companion in their list of "growth gradients" for both ages 3 and 4. Several observational studies of individual children also report the first appearance of an imaginary companion in this period (Munroe, 1894; Swett, 1910; Nice, 1919; Sperling, 1954; Nagera, 1969; Bach, 1971).

A recent study by Fraiberg and Adelson (1973) of the beginnings of self-representation in blind children has reported a finding of interest in the study of imaginary companions as well. The acquisition of the stable, non-syncretic "I" is delayed in the language development of the blind child they discuss, but when it does appear it is accompanied by the first representations of the self in doll play and by the invention of an imaginary companion. This finding suggests that the lower limit for the period in which an imaginary companion is most likely to develop may be "visible" in the language development for any given child, usually in the third year of life.

The literature also contains numerous references to older children and adolescents who have imaginary companions (Brittain, 1907; Hurlock and Burstein, 1932; Harriman, 1937; Bender and Vogel, 1941; Wickes, 1966; Nagera, 1969; Bach, 1971; Benson and Pryor, 1973). Some of these companions seem to be extensions of ones created earlier in the pre-school era; others are created at an altogether later period in the child's life. Nagera (1969) has suggested that these imaginary companions of later childhood serve different functions from those of the pre-school era, that they are more apt to

be associated with neurotic conflicts than with normal, developmental ones, and hence that the two types should be separately considered. This distinction is found to be a useful one in this paper in which attention will be focused primarily upon the imaginary companion as it appears in the early years.

Nagera's (1969) distinction is useful again in considering the time at which imaginary companions disappear. The review of the literature reveals no discussion of a "typical" age of disappearance for the imaginary companion of latency or adolescence. The companion of the pre-schooler, however, tends to disappear within a year of the child's fifth birthday, usually before it (Ames and Learned, 1946; Svendsen, 1934).

Type of Child Who Is Likely to Have an Imaginary Companion

Vostrovsky (1895) was the first to suggest that the imaginary companion was likely to be associated with a particular kind of child. She noted that he was apt to be "a child of nervous temperament who is thrown largely on his own resources (p.396)" and furthermore, that "boys are much less susceptible to these fancies than girls (p.394)." In the subsequent literature there has been considerable discussion of the characteristics she noted--sex, temperament, possibly loneliness--along with those of intelligence, creativity, and family position. The relevant findings in each of these areas are summarized below.

Sex: Vostrovsky's (1895) observation that girls were more likely than boys to have an imaginary companion has received support

in several studies (Hurlock and Burstein, 1932; Jersild et al., 1933; Svendsen, 1934; Ames and Learned, 1946). It is interesting to note that the amounts of the reported difference decrease over time if the studies are considered chronologically. Jersild (1960) remarked that the apparent difference between boys and girls in this respect might well be a reflection of cultural rather than genuine developmental differences. In fact, in the most recent study (Manosevitz et al., 1973) 50% of the 63 children who had imaginary companions were boys.

Intelligence: Harvey (1918) was convinced that "no stupid child ever had an imaginary companion" and that its creation was an indication of "unusual mental capacity (p.19)." Terman (1926) noted that the phenomenon occurred among "a good many" gifted children but that comparative data were unavailable for other children. Objective studies have confirmed that children with imaginary companions tend to be of superior intelligence (Jersild et al., 1933; Svendsen, 1934; Ames and Learned, 1946); although at least one author took the pains to point out that the phenomenon was more prevalent among, but not limited to, this group (Svendsen, 1934). It should be noted that the samples used in each of the studies cited above were of better-than-average intelligence to begin with, however, and that no systematic study of the prevalence of imaginary companions among children of truly average or below-average intelligence has been undertaken to date.

Creativity: Children with imaginary companions are considered by definition to be highly imaginative by many writers and, by vir-

tue of a somewhat slippery synonym, to be creative as well. In 1907 Brittain remarked that students who had had imaginary companions were "above average in the imaginative quality of their stories (p. 137)." Since then there has been no attempt until quite recently to assess the creativity of these children, either during the years when they have their companions or later in their lives. Schaefer (1969) compared "creative" to "non-creative" students enrolled in the art, science, and writing programs of ten high schools of superior reputation. Subjects were matched for sex, age, and grade point average. The incidence of childhood imaginary companions was found to have been significantly greater among the "creative" writing groups for both boys and girls. It was not greater in the "creative" groups for either art or science in either sex. The creativity of those who have a childhood imaginary companion thus appears to be specifically verbal in nature.

Loneliness: Family Position and Opportunities for Play: When explanations for the creation of an imaginary companion are sought, one of the first to present itself is that it is the invention of a child who has no one to play with. Vostrovsky (1895) was of this mind, and Svendsen (1934) cites several other writers who shared this opinion. The fact that imaginary companions tend to disappear about the time the child begins school is usually advanced as evidence in support of this view, i.e., that the child created an imaginary friend because his opportunities for social interaction are limited and he gives up the fantasy as soon as he goes to school and has real companions to play with. A number of writers have

pointed out, however, that while loneliness and/or lack of playmates are frequently characteristic, they are by no means always associated with the child who has an imaginary companion (Harvey, 1918; Kirkpatrick, 1920; Jersild et al., 1933; Ames and Learned, 1946). In fact, most recent research suggests that imaginary companion children may be socially more adept than their peers (Manosevitz et al., 1973, and Pines, 1978).

The difficulties which confront the investigator of the relationship between loneliness and the creation of an imaginary companion are readily apparent. It is not easy to tease apart the factors which could be contributing to loneliness and to handle them experimentally in such a way that unequivocal results are obtained. Sibling status and number of outside playmates or opportunities for play have both been mentioned as contributing factors, but until recently neither has been studied in relation to a more complete spectrum of potential causes of loneliness. Although it has been commonly assumed that imaginary companions are more frequent among only children, there does not seem to be much support for this notion (Hurlock and Burstein, 1932; Ames and Learned, 1946). Even when only-child status is looked at just for the time of the imaginary companion's appearance, the children with siblings continue to make up nearly half of those with companions (Svendsen, 1934). The only reported difference in play opportunities between children with and without imaginary companions was given by Svendsen (1934) who found that the children with companions in her sample had had slightly fewer opportunities between the ages of 2 and 3.

The recent study by Manosevitz et al. (1973) has contributed valuable new data to this discussion, not only because it is systematically more reliable, but also because it touches upon aspects of the parent-child relationship hitherto ignored. In a group of 222 3-5-year olds, the 63 found to have imaginary companions were compared with the others. The frequency of only children did not differ significantly between the two, but that of first-borns with younger siblings was significantly higher ($p < .025$) among children with imaginary companions. No significant differences were found in the numbers of pets or playmates, the age of next-younger sibling, or the "social well-adjustedness" of the two groups. The amount of time spent with parents was the same for the two groups, although the children who had imaginary companions were engaged in "significantly more different activities with members of the household ($p < .001$)."

They were also rated by their parents as being more adept at talking and interacting with adults ($p < .01$) and at initiating their own play ($p < .05$).

The authors conclude from these results that indeed imaginary companions are developed by the proverbially lonely first-born or only child in the absence of opportunities for peer interaction, and that their purpose is "to partially alleviate the loneliness of a child who has no siblings and generally lives in an adult-oriented social milieu during a crucial period of childhood socialization and language development" and who thus is enabled to "practice and develop social and language skills which might otherwise develop more slowly (pp. 76,78)." Such conclusions seem rather disappointing

in that they ignore and even distort the intriguing implications of these data. Argument will be put forth in a later section of this paper that they may be differently and more effectively interpreted.

Pathology and Personality Difficulties: There has not to my knowledge been a single instance in the literature in which the phenomenon of the imaginary companion in childhood has been declared an outright form of pathology. Even the earliest writers on the subject emphasize that it is neither "the result of a defective organization" (Vostrovsky, 1895, p.397), nor "an indication of mental derangement" (Harvey, 1918, p.20). Bender and Vogel (1941) appear to be the most extreme advocates of this view in that they present the cases of 14 hospitalized (severely disturbed but non-psychotic) children whose imaginary companions they interpret, not as indicative of pathology, but as being a "positive and helpful mechanism used during a time of need...to compensate for some lack or deficiency in the child's experience or in his relationship with the world (p.64)." None of these children is of the pre-school age under consideration in this paper, however. Most of the discussion of pathology and/or personality difficulties associated with imaginary companions of this younger group concerns individual cases only. Reliable objective data on this subject is scant; Svendsen (1934) reported that personality "difficulties" of some kind were mentioned by 35 of the 40 parents in her sample with "timidity" heading the list; Ames and Learned (1946) state that such difficulties may be but are by no means necessarily present. Manosevitz et al., (1973) found that there were no significant differences in either the mean

numbers nor the types of behavior problems reported by parents of children with and without imaginary companions. Pines (1978) reports on Singer's research involving 3-and-4-year-olds that the children who had imaginary companions, when compared with others, emerged as "less aggressive", "more cooperative," and "better able to concentrate."

Psychoanalytic Interpretations of the Imaginary Companion

Parents and educators have tended to explain the imaginary companion rather simply: as the result of the lonely child's need for peer companionship. The popularity of their view no doubt accounts for its persistence in the literature. Psychoanalytic writers have attended to the intrapsychic rather than the social significance of the imaginary companion in a child's development, and thus, where loneliness is apparent, have considered loneliness and the creation of an imaginary companion both as consequences of intrapsychic conflict rather than one as the cause of the other. Griffiths (1935) spoke of the imaginary companion as a "temporary solution" used in coping with the "sense of loss or deprivation of love by searching some imaginary avenue to regaining of the lost object (p.273)." Fraiberg (1959) wrote of the imaginary companion as a means of mastering childhood fears, calling it "the direct descendant of the savage and ferocious beasts who disturb the sleep of small children (p.17)." Murphy (1962) discusses its role as a support to a child during a painful separation from his mother.

None of these authors has singled out the imaginary companion for exclusive attention; they all mention it in passing, essentially

as one of a variety of possible solutions which might be adopted by a child in a moment of need. Five papers dealing primarily with the imaginary companion have been published in the past two decades, and it is their authors who have contributed most to the discussion of the imaginary companion's metapsychological significance. Their articles are summarized in some detail below.

The Imaginary Companion as a Prestage of the Superego: Sperling (1954) considered the imaginary companion to be a prestage of the superego. His discussion was based upon observations made in his treatment of a three-year-old boy named Rudy, brought to him because he "seemed to be hallucinating." Rudy had from birth been a sensitive child who was easily upset when anything "frustrated...his illusion of omnipotence (or) affronted his narcissism (p.254)." He had been particularly sensitive to his father's commands until the creation of "Rudyman," an imaginary companion, who had to approve all parental orders before Rudy would obey them. With the birth of his companion Rudy's distress at parental commands disappeared and he became "more independent and more satisfied with himself (p.253)." Rudyman had a number of Rudy's parents' characteristics. Although he used expressions of and displayed the values of Rudy's mother, Sperling (1954) emphasizes the attributes which were more clearly identified with Rudy's father: Rudyman's loud male voice, his intolerance for any authority besides himself, his name--a combination of "Herman", the father's name, and Rudy's own. Sperling especially emphasizes the similarity of Rudyman's "jealousy" to the jealousy Rudy's father had displayed when his son had admired a family friend named Arthur.

Sperling (1954) notes that as a very young child Rudy had coped with fears by means of identification with the aggressor (he had played "train" and "dog" when frightened of these); and he assumes that Rudy's creation of an imaginary companion is likewise prompted by fear and as such represents another form of this defense mechanism. He questions why the boy needed to identify with an imaginary being, however, rather than directly with his father. The implication of his answer is that the underlying motive for the creation of Rudyman was the wish to "puncture" the omnipotence of the parental authority:

The episode with Arthur which preceded the Rudyman game seems to offer the clue. Rudy's parents did not contradict one another in their dealings with him and he therefore could not play one against the other, but in Arthur he had found a second authority, one which by its very presence punctured the omnipotence of the first authority. In Rudyman, Rudy established a second authority and one which would not arouse his parents' jealousy. (p.255).

Sperling (1954) does not fully explore the implications of his thought here, but goes on to conclude that Rudyman represents "the narcissistic root of the ego ideal" and evidence that "a boy can have a male superego (p.255)." In Sperling's view, the father's jealousy is taken over into his introjected image with the result that other earlier ego ideals (namely, the dog, the train, and Arthur) are repressed and the unification of the superego is begun.

Sperling (1954) is not the first writer to discuss the imaginary companion in relation to the superego or, in non-psychoanalytic

terms, the moral development of the child,² but he does seem to be the first to relate its creation to an experience of "narcissistic injury" in so many words. This seems a valid and useful observation. His explanation of the phenomenon simply in terms of the mechanism of "identification with the aggressor," however, seems incomplete. It will be proposed in this paper that it is the controlling and protecting, rather than purely the aggressive aspects of the parent which come into focus in the creation of an imaginary companion and that the companion serves--not to puncture the omnipotence of a parent--but to prolong the omnipotence which the child experienced in an earlier stage of relationship to that parent.

The Imaginary Companion as an Aid in Ego Development and Conflict

Solution: Nagera (1969) considered the imaginary companion as a special type of fantasy with particular significance in the solution of developmental conflicts during the ego development of the small child. Like ordinary daydreams, he points out, the imaginary companion fantasy is an attempt at wish fulfillment. It is governed by the pleasure principle, and its creator can disregard the reality principle without impairment to normal reality testing. Also like other forms of fantasy, the imaginary companion may be a temporary measure devised in a time of stress "to solve conflicts and to restore, at least transitorily, the inner equilibrium before excessive

²Munroe (1894) considered "the fancy to be of immense benefit to the child's moral growth (p.184);" Swett (1910) wrote of an imaginary being "associated most prominently with C's moral development (p.104);" Wickes (1927) mentions the imaginary companion as an embodiment of the conscience and the ego ideal.

stress forces a path into symptom formation, regression, or other disturbances (p.182)." Nagera points out that there are two important ways in which the imaginary companion of the pre-school child differs from the fantasies of older children and adults. The latter are generally concerned with gratification of instinctual impulses which have become conflicted while the young child's imaginary companion "fills the emptiness, neglect, loneliness, or rejection which the child seems to be experiencing (p.194)" and is not associated with wishes which are conflicted in a neurotic sense. Hence while older children and adults tend to be reticent about exposing their fantasies, young children will talk openly and eagerly about their imaginary friends. Secondly, while an active fantasy life usually implies some withdrawal from the world of real objects, the creation of an imaginary companion does not, since its young creator seeks actively to integrate his fantasy into real life and to gain acceptance for it within his real object world.

Nagera (1969) continues to point out the differences between the pre-schooler's imaginary companion and the fantasies of later childhood as he describes the various functions it may serve. His "list" of these functions, presented briefly earlier in this paper (see p.8), is illustrated in rich detail with clinical material from his own comprehensive review of the literature, from his own practice, and from the files of Hampstead Clinic. Like Spurling (1954) he stresses the frequent role of superego auxiliary into which the imaginary companion is cast as a kind of intermediate

step between dependence upon external controls and the establishment of an internalized superego of the child's own. Secondly, he mentions the use of the imaginary companion for an "opposite purpose:" "as a vehicle for the discharge of impulses that are no longer acceptable to the child either because he has internalized parental prohibitions or because he fears the parental attitude to such impulses (before internalization has taken place) (p.177)." Closely related is the use of the companion as a scapegoat to whom all the child's badness and negative impulses are assigned, a precursor of later externalization onto a real object. When children feel rejected or unloved for some reason, they may develop imaginary companions who because they personify primitive ego ideals may allow the child vicarious access to parental love and approval. And, "for a few, the imaginary companion is a necessary intermediate step before they can transfer, at least in certain areas, control to their parents while simultaneously accepting limitations to their own previously omnipotent feelings (p.182)."

Throughout his paper Nagera (1969) stresses his belief that in all its many functions the imaginary companion acts as a "developmental buffer...that mitigates for the child's primitive ego what is at times an impossible situation (p.181)." Given its normality and the importance of its functions, he raises an intriguing question: why do imaginary companions so seldom make an appearance in the treatment of children and why are they so infrequently recalled by adults in psychoanalysis? Among other possibilities he suggests:

Perhaps the answer lies (in the case of the very young child) in the fact that what is important is not the content of the fantasy associated with the imaginary companion, but the developmental purpose it is designed to fulfill (p.166)."

The Imaginary Companion as an Aid in Coping with Difficulties in the Anal Stage and the Formation of Gender Identity: Bach (1971) addresses his attention to Nagera's (1969) question and to the issue of the "developmental purpose" which might be served by the imaginary companion. In his analytic work he treated two female patients whom "a distinctly deviant development" had brought to analysis and who both retained vivid memories of childhood companions. He also had occasion to observe a brother and sister, aged 2 and 3, whose shared companion "Doodoo" flourished for a year or so and then, by contrast, was quite forgotten. In both normal and pathological cases, according to Bach, "the fantasy companion appeared as an element in the displacement series of nipple-feces-penis-child, and its survival or disappearance seemed related to how successfully this series was integrated (p.160)." He sees the imaginary companion as playing a special role in helping the child cope with certain conflicts of the anal stage and with the establishment of his sexual identity. Where these developmental goals are achieved satisfactorily, the companion is internalized and its existence forgotten; where they are not, the companion continues to exist because to integrate him into the ego would be too conflictive, yet to abandon him would be to lose an important part of the self.

Bach (1972) points out that both Doodoo and Crumber (the imaginary companion of one adult patient³) are created "in response to a narcissistic blow, the main ingredient of which is a loss of omnipotent control over reality (p.169)." Doodoo appears during the toilet training of the younger sibling and is described as "a boy who is very dirty and very bad...about two to five inches long, although he grows bigger when he eats carrots and meat and vegetables (p.160)." Crumber, "myself folded outwards" in the patient's own words, was invented when during the course of a long trip the patient's mother refused to stop the car for her to go to the bathroom. Bach considers both companions to be "a projection of the omnipotent scybalum...by means (of which) a fragment of the shattered omnipotence was preserved and used to deny separation and helplessness and to master and contain the aggressive impulses (p.169)." Both companions also became equated with the fantasied paternal phallus in addition to holding anal significance⁴. Doodoo evolves into a character who shares many of the children's father's most

³Robin, the imaginary companion of the other adult patient, was essentially an "alter ego" and not an imaginary companion in the classical sense, as Bach is careful to point out. Hence she is omitted from discussion here.

⁴Nice (1919) reports a series of imaginary companions whose anal and phallic significance seems strikingly evident. The series of imaginary companions in question were developed by a little girl between the ages of 3½ and 6. They included "babies," bought at the "chocolate store," who are kept in the cellar until they grow up after "eating so much food;" into a creature called the "Haneater" who eats "hands what are broken off of people" and "just lumps around;" then creatures who "let toads come into their shells; they have jewels in their tails and give them to people and children;" and finally into a "husband" who is "as large as father."

striking attributes; Crumber, through the analytic work, is understood as an imaginary penis around which unresolved conflicts over penis envy and castration fear (dating from the original experience of powerlessness with the mother) have crystallized.

It is through a comparison of the developmental courses of Doodoo and Crumber that Bach (1971) explores the relationship between the fate of the imaginary companion and the maturational process. He concludes that where the original anal conflicts as well as those surrounding the establishment of sexual identity are resolved, the need for the companion disappears, it becomes part of an internal psychic structure, and its separate "outer" existence is forgotten. Thus Doodoo evolved into "Good Doodoo," the incarnation of a perfect ego ideal, before he was internalized and forgotten. In Crumber's case the process was not so successful. He could neither be given up nor fully integrated into the child's ego, hence he continued to exist in memory as an external rather than an internal object and to be the focal point of the patient's difficulties in establishing her feminine identity. Bach (1971) closes by classifying the imaginary companion as:

...a kind of transitional phenomenon, for it becomes implicated in the displacement series of nipple-feces-penis-child⁵, and should tend to disappear with the successful integration of this series through the internalization of the superego and the sexual role (p.170).

⁵For other examples of companions which represent explicit elements in this displacement series cf. Kaplan & Rank's (1962) discussion of "Goopy" an imaginary companion represented by a cup which they interpret as a substitute for the breast; and Murphy's (1962) account of "Woody," a companion with obvious phallic significance created by a child after an accident which exacerbated his fears of castration.

The Imaginary Companion as a "Self-object" with the Function of "Self-mirroring-with Approval:" Benson and Pryor (1973) draw further attention to the relationship proposed by Bach between the imaginary companion, the child's narcissistic development, and the transitional zone of experience. Their article is based on discussion of two cases, in which imaginary companions of long-standing suddenly and dramatically disappear. The first of these, involving Lynn and her companion "Nosey" who was made by Lynn's grandfather to shut the garage door, was mentioned earlier in this paper (see p.5). (The second case is not included here because it is not concerned with a childhood imaginary companion but with the fantasy construction of a psychotic adolescent with a well-established delusional system.)

Lynn's imaginary companion Nosey first appeared sometime after her third birthday while her mother was pregnant with her second child. Nosey was a male dog who stood on his hind legs wearing an apron-like skirt and carrying a mop or broom. As such he was quite similar to the stuffed dog outfitted in a dress which Lynn had adopted as a transitional object when she was 7 months old. At age 16 Lynn recalled that Nosey had been very real to her, although she never actually saw him. She spoke of the circumstances of his last appearance hesitatingly and with "slightly saddened affect," although with no apparent awareness of the unusual nature of the garage door incident. After Nosey's departure, her stuffed dog again became very important to her. Even after her ninth birthday when she was persuaded to give him up, she kept him in a box in her closet and

continued to "visit" him regularly. She spoke of taking "him" out and putting on "his" dress, then interrupted herself to say it must have been "her." Although Benson and Pryor (1973) do not make any reference to Bach's (1971) paper, Lynn's confusion over the gender of her transitional object and presumably of Nosey as well is further evidence of the validity of Bach's observation that the imaginary companion is only internalized and forgotten where conflicts over gender identity are successfully resolved.

In discussing the metapsychological significance of Nosey and the stuffed dog Benson and Pryor (1973) draw upon Kohut's (1971) conception of the "self-object" and Winnicott's (1953) formulation of transitional phenomena which they treat as equivalent. Both the original stuffed dog and the imaginary companion are considered as belonging to the transitional zone of experience and are held to be "self-objects" in that they are invested with narcissistic cathexis and are subjectively experienced as parts of the self.⁶ If Lynn's progress along what the authors refer to as the "developmental line of narcissism" had proceeded smoothly, these "self-objects" might through the process of transmuting internalization (Kohut, 1971) have become integrated in a true cohesive self. By effectively removing Nosey from the imaginary to the "real" world, however, Lynn's grand-

⁶In discussion of the part played by "omnipotent self-extensions" as "transitory psychological structures of normal growth" Wanh (1962) makes a similar statement: "The imaginary companion of later childhood may be a second edition of the early 'transitional object.' In any case, we are dealing here with a thing, a person, or an image created and invoked to play a role in the service of the self without any regard for the object involved (p.453)." Greenacre (1969) makes a similar statement.

father interfered with her companion's status as a "self-object."

At a time in her life when Lynn was most certainly sensitive to narcissistic injury,

...he (Nosey) represented aspects of herself, such as phallic completeness and self-reliance, that she could not quite achieve or yet renounce without a devastating loss in self-esteem...But if Nosey functioned independently of her intention, then he wasn't a part of her. If that was the case, his phallic and competent qualities were a painful confrontation to her and not a satisfying self-reflection. He thus became heir to all the conflicts experienced by Lynn at this phase in her development and which involved all of her object relationships. He was no longer exempt by virtue of his distinction from the object world. A developmental interference took place which greatly interfered although accidentally, with this fantasy construct so necessary if Lynn's development was to continue unimpeded. Nosey had to be abandoned, not only because he wasn't helpful in protecting Lynn's self-esteem, but was in fact a threat to it (p.468).⁷

Having lost her imaginary companion, Lynn turned back to her original transitional object. Benson and Pryor (1973) associate both objects with the function of protecting the self-regard and the sense of the cohesive self. They relate them to Kohut's (1971) "self-approving" function and to what Tolpin (1971) calls "soothing functions" when they are performed by a transitional object. They go on to say:

As the child gets older, however, the needs become somewhat different from those of "soothing." What the child seems to seek from his use of the imaginary companion,

⁷The only other author, to my knowledge, who has commented on the effects of such "interference" with an imaginary companion is Munroe (1894). In describing Katharine and her companion "Morrie" he observed that Katharine's parents "must not 'pretend' about her (Morrie) themselves--except when, occasionally, the mother is asked to pet her,--and if she is called into the room they must not make pretence of seeing her and talking with her. If they do, a certain anxiety seems to fill Katharine's mind: she becomes, in a measure, afraid of her own creation and is suspicious, too, that she is being ridiculed (p.184)."

is an inner sense of perfection and worth. Thus the function of the imaginary companion, rather than being one of soothing, is a kind of reassuring, reminiscent of the demand made upon the mirror in Snow White-- "Mirror, mirror on the wall, who is the fairest (most perfect) one of all?" We have used this phrase "self-mirroring with approval" here to reflect this particular function of the imaginary companion and presumably other self-objects at this time. (p.470).

I believe that Benson and Pryor's (1973) conception of the imaginary companion as a transitional phenomenon invested with a particular and significant function is a useful and interesting one, although I question whether "self-mirroring with approval" adequately describes the function. Further discussion of this is deferred to Section II of the paper.

Imaginary Companions in Relation to Mirror Dreams and Depersonalization: It is interesting that the most recent contribution to the psychoanalytic literature on imaginary companions (Myers, 1976) also relates them to mirror phenomena although its author appears to have been unaware of Benson and Pryor's (1973) paper. Myers (1976) cites material from the case histories of 4 women to demonstrate genetic linkages between the presence of imaginary companions or fantasy twins and extensive mirror play in childhood and early adolescence, and the appearance of mirror dreams and depersonalization in later adolescence and adulthood. He conceives of all these phenomena as having in common a "defensive splitting of the self-representation (...) as a means of warding off castration anxiety and anxiety about object loss, anxieties which arise because of conflicts primarily centering on intense aggressive drive derivative wishes (p.503)." Of the imaginary companion in particular

he writes: "In the imaginary companion phenomena, an attempt is made to maintain the object tie by one of two mechanisms--either by disavowal of the rageful aspects of the self or by the companion's being seen as an idealized phallic self-representation. In both instances the self then becomes acceptable to the parents (p.520)."

None of the imaginary companions created by the women whom Myers discusses can be considered typical of the class of imaginary companions under consideration in this paper. All were created at or later than the age of 6 and in response to severe narcissistic blows in unusually stressful childhoods. Two of the women had psychotic mothers; all suffered abandonment by one or both parents, the birth of and subsequent preference for a younger male sibling, and profound oedipal disappointments which led to intense feelings of castration. While aggressive fantasies and resulting anxieties about castration and object loss may play a role in the creation of all imaginary companions, their intensity in these 4 cases⁸ does not seem typical of the pre-schooler whose imaginary companion flourishes for a while and is then forgotten. Nor does the typical pre-schooler who has an imaginary companion seem predisposed to episodes of de-personalization in later life.

One aspect of the companions Meyers describes is interesting to note. All were ideal, all good creatures: they "never fought," they "always shared," they were "adored" by their parents, they

⁸And in another, similar, instance cited by Eisnitz (1961) to which Myers also refers.

never experienced rivalry nor anger, they were admired and had special and often obviously phallic, super-powers.

One of the questions raised in the proposed study is whether particular configurations of "role assignments" to imaginary companions appear related to some aspect of the child, his parent, or their interaction. Myers' data suggest that the creation of a very idealized companion may possibly be linked with a less-than-satisfactory parent-child relationship.

III. Theoretical Considerations

This section of the paper is devoted to an articulation of the particular theoretical premises upon which the hypotheses of the proposed study are based. In it I intend, first, to review Winnicott's (1953) original conception of transitional phenomena in order to make clear why it is useful to consider the imaginary companion in this way. Secondly, I hope to examine the differences as well as the areas of overlap between the blanket or Teddy bear and the imaginary playmate. I will consider the timing of their emergence and the function(s) they serve. Then I will examine their "essential properties" (Winnicott, 1953) from the perspective of the different central features of the parent-child relationship which I believe are reflected in each. I will propose that for the child who creates an imaginary companion the sound of the mother's voice has been a central feature of his early together-with-mother experiences. Finally, I shall consider the existing evidence in support of such a conception.

Winnicott's Formulation: The Parallels Between the Transitional Object and the Imaginary Companion.

Winnicott's (1953) formulation of the transitional object concept begins in the spatial metaphor by which he understands human experience. Between the external reality of our common experience and the inner reality of each human being, he claims there must be a third area of experiencing, an area which lies between the subjective and the objectively perceived, where the perpetual human task

of keeping inner and outer realities separate yet related is continually performed. Transitional phenomena belong to this intermediate area and their role is defined in terms of this perpetual task. The first transitional object, the bit of blanket or soft toy with which the infant soothes himself, is transitional because it is a not-me possession which is nevertheless not fully recognized or experienced as belonging to external reality.

Its essential nature derives in part from the fact that it stands for, and yet is not, the mother or the maternal breast. The transitional object is a product of the infant's relationship to the "good-enough" mother who, by means of her initially perfect adaptation to her child's needs, gives the infant the illusion that her breast (or the soothing care for which it stands) is part of himself. The fact that initially she is there, ready to respond to his need, enables the infant to experience her response as his own creation, i.e., through his need he is able to create her over and over again. Winnicott refers to this phenomenon as "primary creativity." By means of this "primary creativity" an illusion is fostered within the infant that there is an external reality which corresponds perfectly to his own need to create. Eventually as the infant grows and is able to tolerate greater doses of frustration, the mother adapts less and less perfectly to his needs. Thus a process of disillusionment is initiated through which the conception of a reality which is external, i.e., beyond the reach of the infant's need and control, is allowed to arise. It is only at the end of this process that the child has developed a conception of himself and his needs

which is truly distinct from the concept of his mother and her ability to satisfy them. The intermediate area between the initial illusion and the end of the disillusionment process, when the child becomes capable of "objective perception based on reality testing," is the home of the transitional object.

This bit of blanket or soft toy has a number of distinguishing properties in Winnicott's (1953) formulation. First of all, in a very important sense, it is the infant's creation and property: he "assumes rights over it" and it is implicit that we do not question or challenge this assumption. Although from our point of view the object belongs to the outside world of reality which is external to the child, for the infant it remains in an intermediate area of reality which is neither purely external nor altogether internal as an hallucination would be. The object's physical qualities of softness, texture, and odor are identified with the mother and her care and "are essential properties." The infant makes use of the object in falling asleep and in times of stress as a defense against anxiety, particularly of a depressive sort. It will be subjected to a wide range of behaviors and feeling-states: it will be "affectionately cuddled as well as excitedly loved and mutilated," and "it must survive instinctual loving, and also hating, and, if it be a feature, pure aggression." The object must never be changed by anyone other than the child himself; mothers usually know and respect this instinctively. And finally, its fate is "to be gradually allowed to be decathected," it is neither forgotten nor mourned, it does not "go inside" nor undergo repression, it simply

"loses meaning (p.91)."⁹

If the imaginary companion is considered in relation to this same list of Winnicott's (1953) "distinguishing properties" the parallels are striking indeed. The imaginary companion, too, is the child's creation and property: he "assumes rights over it," alone directing its entrances and exits in such a way that we understand implicitly that his assumption is not to be challenged. While we may recognize that the companion's actions or attributes are really those of "real" people, for the child they remain firmly attached to an imaginary being who occupies a position in the intermediate area between "inner" and "outer" realities. Certain of the companion's qualities--with the important difference that they are auditory rather than tactile--are identified with the parent and his/her care and "are essential properties." Just as the blanket serves as a defense against anxiety, so does the imaginary companion: using it as a scapegoat the child avoids the anxiety of having to recognize shortcomings of his own; investing it with power

⁹This last aspect of the transitional object--its fate--has recently been reconsidered by Tolpin (1971) who proposes that it does "go inside" and become internalized as a new piece of psychic structure. In her view the transitional object is associated with a particular maternal function, the soothing function, and it represents a transitional form of mental structure which is repeatedly cathected and decathected by the infant as need arises during the long process in which he eventually becomes able to soothe himself. She suggests that Kohut's (1971) concept of the "transmuting internalization" is useful in understanding this process and she gives a beautiful, sensitively detailed account of its course. Tolpin's (1971) revision of Winnicott's (1953) concept is cited here not just because it seems to be a valuable addition but because it affords another parallel between the transitional object and the imaginary companion which I also think, as Bach (1971) suggested, "goes inside" when development is successful.

or virtue, the child gains access to support or approval when his real parent is unavailable to provide them directly. Like the blanket, the companion is subjected to a wide range of behaviors and feeling-states as it is loved, hated, admired, punished, or simply ignored by its creator. The imaginary companion, too, "must never be changed by anyone other than the child himself." Just as the "good-enough" mother refrains from washing her infant's beloved blanket or stuffed toy, she intuitively honors and does not interfere with the toddler's imaginary companion. And finally, as with the transitional object, the imaginary companion is eventually given up in healthy development once the child is able to perform for himself internally the functions for which he previously needed his imaginary friend.

The process of "construction" of the two can also be considered the same. Neither transitional phenomenon can arise outside the context of the "good enough" mothering relationship. Winnicott (1953) makes clear how the "good enough" mother provides the infant with the illusion of an external reality which conforms perfectly to his needs and how the creation of the transitional object is dependent upon the prior experience of this illusion. The creation of the imaginary companion depends upon a similar previous experience of omnipotence, an illusion of an external reality in which the child's actions and impulses have no harmful or unpleasant consequences. The "good enough" mother of the young toddler provides him with this illusion by virtue of her own controlling and protecting behaviors. Just as the mother of the infant "places the

actual breast just there where the infant is ready to create, and at the right moment" (Winnicott, 1953), so the mother of the toddler speaks a word of caution or places a controlling hand "just there" where he is in need of it "and at the right moment." From the moment he can walk dangerous objects are placed out of reach, he is kept away from the stove and the medicine cabinet, and in numerous other ways precautions are taken to protect him from being hurt or getting into trouble.

Eventually, however, the parent expects his child to assume control of his behavior on his own. Toilet-training, which is very likely to be underway in this stage of the child's development, is a case in point. As the child gets older and especially as his command of language improves, he will be increasingly expected to "listen to" his parents' warnings or commands, to remember and to anticipate the consequences of his actions, and to master his impulses so that he behaves in socially appropriate ways. In other words, these functions originally performed by his parents must eventually become internalized as a part of his own mental structure.

The process by which this is accomplished is like that which occurs in the formation of the transitional object. In Winnicott's (1953) terms once the "good enough" mother has given her child the illusion of being perfectly safe and insulated from harm, her task becomes one of disillusionment. In Tolpin's (1971) words the process begins as the child experiences "repeated minimal losses" of parental control or support. These "minimal losses" may occur in several ways. Even the "good enough" mother cannot anticipate and

prevent every misfortune. Sooner or later the child will fall, cut his lip, or overturn his orange juice on the carpet, if not worse. When he is suddenly frightened, hurt, or the object of parental anger, he gets his first tastes of an environment in which his actions or impulses have unpleasant consequences and where his self-esteem is easily shattered. As he gets older and is increasingly expected "to know better by himself," his parents begin to scold or be disappointed in him for doing things which previously they would either have allowed or themselves taken steps to prevent. Again the child finds himself facing unpleasant consequences because he did not have access to the kind of parental protection or support which he once enjoyed. A mother's preoccupation with a new baby, her absence due to illness or death, or her withdrawal in depression might also be responsible for his suddenly feeling alone, unprotected, or in Winnicott's words, "disillusioned." This disillusionment, this experienced gap, provides the motivation for the creation of the imaginary companion as a transitional form of mental structure.

Differences Between the Transitional Object and the Imaginary Companion

What about the differences between the transitional object and the imaginary companion? Before I turn to the obvious and significant difference between the all-important tactile properties of one and the invisibility of the other, I should like to discuss their differences with respect to the timing of their development and the function(s) that they serve. In both of these areas there is over-

lap and distinctions between the two phenomena are blurry. Typically the attachment to the blanket develops earlier, often in the first months of life, while the imaginary companion cannot appear much before the age of 2 or whenever language is acquired. Several writers, however, have noted that attachments to blankets or stuffed animals may develop later than the first year and well into the period when imaginary companions also are created.¹⁰ Transitional objects are generally associated with self-soothing at bedtime and imaginary companions assumed to function as playmates or protectors of a child's self-esteem, but there are children whose imaginary friends are summoned at bedtime just as there are others who turn to their blankets when scolded or who use their Teddy bears in play. In other words, either may serve the same function. Greenacre (1969) writes of a little boy who when sent to retrieve his rubbers from a strange closet, opened the door and threw his blanket in before venturing in himself. She characterized this as a "further step in the development of the transitional object," saying that the blanket here functions as a projection of "that version of the self in which the mother's presence still lingers," and suggesting that it is in this instance a "forerunner of the imaginary companion (p. 320)." I question whether "forerunner" is truly accurate. Some

¹⁰Stevenson (1954) reported on 43 children of whom 22 developed attachments at a year or older, and 12 at 2 years or older. Busch et al. (1974) distinguished between "primary transitional objects" created in the first year of life--studying 27 or 40 children who developed attachments in this period--and "secondary" ones, developed later. Gay and Hyson (1976) interviewed parents of 20 children with transitional objects and found 11 dated from the first year of life, 6 from the second, 3 from the third, though none after the age of 3.

children develop imaginary companions which seem to be direct descendants of their transitional objects--"Nosey, the imaginary companion cited by Benson and Pryor (1973) and mentioned earlier is one such--but other children may have both at the same time or conceivably one without ever developing the other. I think the function(s) of either is more related to the age of its owner and thus to whatever conflicts or anxieties are uppermost for him at that time.¹¹

Broadly defined, the function of both transitional object and imaginary companion can be considered the preservation of the child's sense of well-being. As the child develops from an infant to a four-year-old, he becomes an increasingly differentiated and complex person and the task of ensuring his well-being likewise becomes increasingly complicated. Freedom from distress for the infant may be largely a matter of physical comfort and security in the presence of mother's body. For the toddler, however, with his advanced motoric capacities, his differentiated drives, his increasingly complex relationships to others and his emerging psychological awareness of separateness, distressing insults to his narcissistic equilibrium may come from many quarters. If as an infant he has developed a transitional object which at times of distress helps him to

¹¹Gay and Hyson's (1976) observations of 2 and 4 year olds revealed "different kinds of stress" precipitated a move to the blanket in the 2 age groups: more overt conflict over the child's autonomy or mother's refusal to meet demands in the younger children as opposed to "more subtle, sensed rejections or feelings of guilt in the older ones. (p.308)" Similar observations of imaginary companion usage in relation to children's ages have not been made (except in the broader sense of Nagera's distinction between pre-school and latency age imaginary companions.

feel better, it is understandable that he might continue to draw it into service in meeting whatever stresses arise as he grows older. Another child at this juncture might develop an imaginary friend to cope with the same stresses. What accounts for the difference between the two? Why do some children continue to rely solely on their blankets while others develop imaginary friends instead or alongside?

I think the answer is to be found in considering the differences between the tactile properties of the transitional object and the verbal, auditory ones of the imaginary companion. I would like to propose that the two phenomena be considered self-objects in which, to borrow Greenacre's metaphor, different aspects of the mother's presence still linger, i.e., while the blanket contains the lingering presence of her body and clothing, the imaginary companion contains the lingering presence of her words and her voice. In a literal sense it is not that either "contains" an aspect of mother so much as that each lends itself to a particular kind of interaction in which the memory of being with mother, and all the feelings of well-being that connotes, is evoked.

How it "works" is this: when the infant nuzzles or strokes his blanket, he produces tactile and perhaps olfactory sensations which are intimately associated with his experience of being held and soothed by his mother. As he is increasingly faced with her absence in situations where he has previously experienced her presence in these ways, he turns to his discovery that he can produce by himself some of these sensations and the feelings of well-being

they bring. I think something similar happens with the toddler and his imaginary friend. When he talks to, tells about, or "listens to" his imaginary companion, I think he too is engaging in a familiar, highly cathected form of interaction. It is my hypothesis that the early close-to-mother experiences of the child who develops an imaginary companion have been especially filled with the sounds of mother's voice. They make up an integral part of what Sandler (1960) has described as the "background of safety." When these children are suddenly faced with a loss of mother's supportive presence--especially in situations where they are accustomed to hearing her voice--I think they perpetuate or recreate the feeling of her being there by resorting to words. They create an imaginary being who can be interacted with as she was. I do not mean this just on the most concrete level, i.e., that the child talks to or about the companion as he has been talked to by his parent (although this certainly happens), but more generally that the child experiences himself as all-right and not-alone because the conjuring up of the sounds or verbal imagery in which he experiences his imaginary friend is so reminiscent of together-with-mother experiences.

Conceptualizing an imaginary companion in this way has certain advantages. First, it provides a basis for explaining why some children develop imaginary companions while the majority do not. While tactile experience is bound to be an important aspect of mothering for most infants (hence the frequency with which transitional objects are developed); this is not necessarily the case

for auditory experiences. Mothers differ widely in their propensities to talk or sing to their children and their children may differ widely in their sensitivities and responsiveness to this kind of interchange.¹² Secondly, conceiving of the imaginary companion as evocative of mother's verbal presence and the transitional object as reminiscent of her physical presence provides an interesting perspective from which to think about why a child resorts to one or the other in a given situation. Considering the child who has both a Teddy bear and an imaginary friend--can his choice of comforter be understood as reflecting the particular aspect of mother which is missed at a specific time? Is the imaginary friend rather than the Teddy bear summoned when he has done something wrong because it was specifically the unavailability of his mother-as-verbalizer-of-controls that got him into trouble? Does the Teddy bear reign supreme at bedtime because it is mother's body, not her voice, that is missed at that time? If the Teddy bear loses importance as the imaginary friend assumes it, is this understandable as a particular manifestation of a general developmental progression away from close-to-mother's-body experience and toward increasing reliance upon language? Is the child who creates an imaginary friend but never a transitional object one for whom tactile experiences of mother were somehow problematic?

¹²In a 1972 paper concerned with the place of hearing and oral language in the development of psychic structure, Freedman makes the point that--unlike vision for instance--"the vocal-auditory system is not a prerequisite for, nor even a significant factor in, the early phases of (ego) development (p.67)".

The Evidence So Far

At this point, I would like to look at the existing evidence in support of the hypothesis that there has been a highly verbal, sound-filled relationship to a parent in the background of the child who develops an imaginary friend. There is already evidence accumulated in the literature that the children are highly verbal. Brittain's (1907) observation that students who had had imaginary companions were "above average in the imaginative quality of their stories" is a case in point. Schaefer's (1969) finding that among groups of "creative" adolescents it was only the writers--not the artists or the scientists--who had had significantly more imaginary companions during childhood is another. It is entirely plausible too that the "superior intelligence" of the child-with-imaginary-companion which has been noted by so many investigators (Harvey, 1918; Terman, 1926; Jersild et al., 1933; Svendsen, 1934; Ames and Learned, 1946) is in fact reducible to a particular verbal ability. The most solid evidence of their verbal sophistication, however, comes from the recent study by Manosevitz et al. (1973) in which imaginary-companion children at pre-school age were found to be "significantly more adept at talking and interacting with adults ($p < .01$)" than their peers.

Despite the evidence that the children are highly verbal, there is little in the literature about their parents or their parenting behaviors. In some accounts of individual children there is incidental information to be gleaned about the verbal behavior of a parent. Murphy (1962), in discussing a little boy named Sam who

invented an imaginary friend after an accident in which his fingertip was cut off, says quite a bit about his relationship to a mother who is obviously highly articulate. Her diary--and the very fact that she kept a diary speaks to her investment in words--is quoted extensively and provides ample evidence of the importance of verbal interchange between her and Sam. Murphy stresses Sam's "verbal competence" and use of questions as a way of keeping contact with his mother but she also adds: "How important it was for his mother (my italics) to listen, tolerate, and deal with his questions in some way is obvious (p.144)".

Manosevitz et al. (1973) report one other finding in their study of children and their families which hints provocatively that mothers of children with imaginary companions may, as a group, be highly verbal. In their study, parents of children with and without imaginary companions were asked to list the activities child and parent engaged in jointly and to estimate the amount of time they spent together. No difference was found in the amount of time spent together but the parents of children with imaginary friends listed "significantly more different activities" that the child engaged in with members of the household. This finding, the only one in their study to achieve significance at $p < .001$ level, can be variously interpreted. It can be said to reflect purely a real difference in the children's activities or a difference in the way their parents fill out questionnaires--namely that parents whose children have imaginary companions will tend to produce longer and more detailed lists when asked about their children, because they are more verbally inclined.

There is one last finding to be considered which lends strong support to the notion that verbal interchange is a central feature in the parent-child relationship of a child who develops an imaginary companion and that is the fact that imaginary companions turn up in blind children with much higher frequency than they do in a normal population. Singer and Streiner (1966) compared the imaginative content in dreams and fantasy play of blind and sighted children and found the blind children, as predicted, to be less imaginative in all areas with the exception of their "significantly greater reference to imaginary companions, generally of a wishful or compensatory character (p.480)." Comparable data on the incidence of imaginary friends among other handicapped groups do not exist to my knowledge, so it is not possible to rule out the explanation that it is simply the handicap itself which prompts the creation of so many imaginary companions among blind youngsters. Nevertheless it is hard to conceive of a parent-child relationship in which auditory and verbal experience would be more focal. Hence, it is tempting to interpret the higher incidence of imaginary companions among the blind as evidence in support of the notion that talking with the companion evokes the auditory experience of mother's presence.

IV. Hypotheses and Research Design

The following study was conceptualized as an exploratory one intended to determine whether there is evidence for the hypothesized phenomenon, namely, that there is an especially "sound-filled" mother-child relationship in the background of the child who develops an imaginary companion. Mothers of children with imaginary companions were interviewed to see whether they would emerge as highly verbal, "talking caretakers" and/or whether their early relationships with the children who developed imaginary companions were in fact especially "filled with the sounds of their voices." No attempt was made to compare these mothers with the mothers of other children who do not have imaginary friends. The problem of differentiating children with imaginary companions from other children, of equally verbal parents, who do not invent imaginary companions was left for a subsequent study.

In the interviews, described in greater detail below, mothers were asked to talk about their children's imaginary companions first in any way that occurred to them to do so and then to answer a number of questions about the companion(s) and about the child. I expected that the mothers would emerge as highly invested in these children's verbal development and, as such, that their perceptions of it would be distinct in several ways. They would remember its beginnings in detail and with strong positive affect. They would view these children as very verbal and unusually precocious in language acquisition. Further, I expected the mothers to characterize themselves and their spouses as essentially "talking caretakers" who

in both consciously explicit and unconsciously implicit ways rely upon verbal exchange in caring for these youngsters. On the basis of these expectations I hypothesized that:

1) Mothers will spontaneously refer to the verbal abilities of the child with the imaginary companion in the course of responding to the interviewer's first question which asks mothers to "tell me about your child's imaginary companion in any way that occurs to you."

2) According to mothers' recollections, the child with an imaginary companion will have begun talking in sentences before the age of two.

3) Mothers will have detailed memories of the early words and sentences of the child who has an imaginary companion.

4) Mothers will report that they or their husbands began reading aloud or telling stories to the child with an imaginary companion before s/he was 12 months old.

5) In describing the bedtime routine of the child who has an imaginary companion, mothers will mention one or more of the following sound-filled experiences as occurring just prior to the child's going to sleep: story-telling or reading aloud, singing or humming, or talking with parents.

6) In describing the methods of limit-setting and discipline they use with the child who has an imaginary companion, mothers will specifically refer to what they tell or say to him/her, be it in the form of explanation, gentle reminder, threat, recrimination, or rebuke.

7) In describing their handling of separations, mothers will specifically refer to "talking about it" or to what they "told" the child who has an imaginary companion.

In addition to information bearing upon these hypotheses, I hoped that the interviews would yield information about three other aspects of the imaginary companion phenomenon. First, I was interested in its relationship to transitional object usage. If children have both a transitional object and an imaginary companion, what can be said about the vicissitudes of each? Do many flourish simultaneously? How much "overlap" or "interchangeability" do they seem to have? Are there children with imaginary friends who have never had a transitional object? If so, do they appear different in any way from children who have both?

Secondly, I wondered about the configurations of companion-to-child and child-to-parent role relationships. While with a small number of subjects, I expected the individual variations to be perhaps even more apparent than any overall similarities, I still wondered about the patterning of "role assignments" made by different children to their imaginary friends. Do the same children idealize and scapegoat their imaginary companions? Does one type of role usage precede another? Do children who parent their imaginary friends appear different from those who are parented by them? Are there implications to be drawn from the diversity of a given companion's roles or from the rigidity with which a child assigns them? And finally, can particular patterns of "role assignment" be associated with any identifiable aspects of child or parent or with

patterns of parent-child interaction?

Third, I was curious whether there would be data in the interviews supporting the notion that a narcissistic blow of some kind acts as a "precipitating event" in the creation of an imaginary companion. How much direct confirmation of this theoretical notion would there be in parents' perceptions or explanations of why and/or when their children's imaginary companions developed? How well might the data supplied by parents support clinical inference to this effect?

Finally I wondered whether the interviews might reveal other dimensions of parent or child or their interaction which appear significantly related--either in addition or instead of the hypothesized verbal characteristics--to the creation of an imaginary companion.

Subjects

Subjects were mothers of youngsters between the ages of 2 and 7 who had or had recently had imaginary friends. For purposes of recruitment an imaginary companion was defined as "an invisible, make-believe person, animal, or creature of some kind whom the child may talk about or play with in a variety of ways." Mothers were recruited through friends, by means of letters sent home by several nursery schools in the New York City area, and with signs posted in a Greenwich Village supermarket and in a Child Health Station in a Community Mental Health Center in the South Bronx.¹³

¹³See Appendix I for text of letter and signs.

I had originally decided to interview a total of 12 subjects, 6 mothers of boys and 6 of girls, but once underway I decided to interview everyone who contacted me and was then willing to continue.¹⁴ Consequently, I ended up interviewing a total of 18 mothers of whom 10 were mothers of girls and 8 of boys. Of these 18, 13 were recruited by means of letters sent home from nursery schools,¹⁵ 3 were referred by personal friends, and 2 others responded to the sign posted in my neighborhood supermarket. (The one mother who responded to the sign in the South Bronx Child Health Station failed to understand (despite my explanation over the telephone) that I was interested in speaking with her and essentially left me alone with her child when I arrived at her home.)

The 18 children in question ranged in age from 2 to 7 years. They included two 2-year-olds, seven 3-year-olds, four 4-year-olds, four 5-year-olds, one 6- and one 7-year old. Ten of them had imaginary companions who were active at the time of the interview, though

¹⁴One mother decided in the course of our initial telephone conversation that to proceed with the interview would represent a violation of her son's privacy and hence, not to continue. Another woman called because her niece had an imaginary companion and she was wondering whether it was something to be concerned about. There were 3 or 4 other calls from parents of much older children who had had imaginary companions as toddlers and from teachers who had once taught children with imaginary friends and wondered if they could be of help.

¹⁵Parents from the following nursery schools responded to letters: The Barnard Toddler Center (1); Church of the Epiphany Nursery School (3); West Side Montessori (3); Riverside Church Nursery School (1, who also referred a friend of hers); Riverdale YMHA Nursery School (2); Riverdale Temple (1); and The Spuyten Duyvil Infantry (1).

3 of these were described as "fading." The remaining 8 children, with one exception, had given up their imaginary companions within the preceding year. (Rachel, the 7-year-old, had given up her imaginary companion 2 years previously.) Over half of the children (11) had developed their companions as 2-year-olds; 5 others had been between 3 and 4 when their imaginary friends emerged; one boy had been 6, and one girl, so her mother insisted, had been only 18 months old. Ten children were only children at the time of the interview; six had one younger sibling; and the remaining 2 were "middle" children with one older and one younger sibling.

The imaginary companions, as a group, were quite stable, long-lived creatures for these children: all but one flourished for a minimum of 6 months and the majority lasted over a year.¹⁶ In other ways they were a typical collection. Seven children had a single imaginary companion, while the rest had 2 or more. Their names ran the gamut from the known and familiar (Andrew and George) to the fanciful and idiosyncratic (Jaycee and Jaffee, Satsamatzen, or Kalkit, Dumindumin, and Googiegow). Some were defined as imaginary family members, e.g., Leslie had a husband named Hosta as well as another character named Brother, Ari had a wife named Moey, and he and Alden both had shifting numbers of children, with and without names. Other imaginary companions were derived from books (Susan's Flora from the Babar stories, Melissa's Joey from The Best Word Book

¹⁶John's imaginary friend Donna was only "around for about 3 weeks" according to his mother.

Ever, and Carolyn's¹⁷ Frances and Gloria from Lillian Hoban's stories about Frances the Badger. Their ages and sexes varied from the definite to the indeterminate and the variable. Seven children had same-sex companions (4 girls and 3 boys), three had opposite-sex ones (2 boys and 1 girl), while the rest had either companions of both sexes or ones whose gender was shifting or unclear. A few imaginary companions were consistently defined as "older" or "younger" than their child creators but the vast majority were peers. They were used in all the typical ways discussed earlier in this paper (e.g., as objects for the child to mother, as partners in play, as scapegoats, as wish-fulfilling alter-egos and so on), though not in all ways by all children.

I did not collect systematic data on the parental educational backgrounds or family income levels of these children because I wished to make the interview as non-intrusive as possible, but it was nevertheless apparent that most of them belonged to middle or upper-middle class families. 16 were white families, 2--one boy's and one girl's--were black. All but one were intact, two-parent families. (Eric's parents had divorced within the preceding 6

¹⁷In Carolyn's case the phenomenon was somewhat different from the other children. Carolyn adopted the role of Frances the Badger herself, changing her voice--often enlisting her amused and willing parents in the books' roles as 'Mother' and 'Father'--and then referring to an imaginary 'Gloria' (the little sister in the books). The fact that Carolyn would also refer to Gloria (e.g., Gloria did it!") when she was being herself, i.e., not playing the Frances role, meant that Gloria was also an imaginary companion in the more usual sense, and, hence, that Carolyn qualified for inclusion in the study.

months but had been living together throughout the time he had had his imaginary friend Bissy.) The majority of fathers were educated, professional people: they included 3 doctors, 3 lawyers, and a minister, for instance, though there were also a milkman, a transit worker, and a building superintendant among them. Most of the children's mothers appeared well-educated too. Though 8 of them were full-time housewives at the time of the interview, several were college-educated and/or had been previously employed. Among the mothers who worked there were a doctor, a molecular biologist, 2 teachers, a secretary and a book-keeper. All of the children were attending or had attended some form of nursery school or playgroup, most of them privately run. Hence, by virtue their own backgrounds, their uniformity in valuing early education for their children, and, most important, their common willingness to volunteer themselves as interview subjects, these parents were no doubt an articulate, verbally inclined group to begin with. It is, thus, a limitation of this study that the process of finding subjects was so predisposed to turn up highly verbal people.

Procedure

Mothers were interviewed by me in their homes or some other convenient place at a time of their choosing. They were asked to schedule the interview at a time when they could be available for "one to two hours" though no constraints were placed on the length of the actual interviews. Most lasted a little over an hour, though a few continued for over 2 hours. Most mothers chose to be inter-

viewed at home and only 2 were completely alone during that time. 15 of the 18 were also taking care of children as we talked and in 3 cases fathers who were home joined the interview as well. 13 of the 18 imaginary-companion children were present in varying degrees as well. Even though I had explained over the telephone that I was interested in speaking to mothers, several of them wanted me to talk with their children as well. Where this occurred I tried to accommodate the child's or mother's wishes as gracefully as I could while keeping as close as possible to the interview format.

The interview was an open-ended, semi-structured one. (See Appendix II.) It followed a specified format but as interviewer I was free to follow up any unclear references or interesting lines of thought with further questions. All interviews were conducted by me and recorded on a cassette tape recorder. I then made transcripts for further study. Transcripts ran from 8 to 26 pages, single-spaced, in length. Unfortunately, due to difficulties with the tape recorder all of one interview and parts of 2 others were lost. The sound quality of the interview with Magdalen's mother was so poor that transcription was impossible; the first half hour of Adam's mother's interview went unrecorded because of a loose wire; and all but the first few minutes of Tara's mother's interview was lost when the tape recorder and cassette were stolen after only 3 pages had been transcribed. Since parts of the interviews were preserved in the latter two cases, I decided to include the relevant remaining data about Adam and Tara wherever possible. The final analysis of results, thus, is based on 17 interviews with mothers of 9 girls and 8 boys.

V. Results

Due to the nature of the hypotheses in the study I felt that it made little sense to present results independently of some discussion. Consequently, each hypothesis, the evidence in its favor, and any difficulties which arose in consideration of that evidence are discussed below. Further discussion of the meaning of the results with respect to the overall aims of the study is then presented in the following section.

Hypothesis 1 (N=17)

Mothers will spontaneously refer to the verbal abilities of the child with the imaginary companion in the course of responding to the interviewer's first question which asks mothers "to tell me about your child's imaginary companion in any way that occurs to you."

At the outset it is important to note that there was no question in the interview format which directed mothers to speak about their children's verbal abilities or about when they had learned to speak. This hypothesis was based on my expectation that these children's verbal development was of such significance to their mothers that not only would they bring it up spontaneously, they would do so immediately at the outset of the interview. Three mothers did just that. Melissa's began:

Well, this started happening--I can't say in terms of what happens inside her head--she's always been very verbal so that by 2 she was really putting sentences together very well...

Nicole's mother started out:

Nicole's imaginary friend...I'm not sure how responsible we were...Nicole at about--she's very verbal and...

And Tara's mother began:

She doesn't remember much about them. She was about 18 months old. She started talking when she was very young so by 18 months she was pretty verbal...

Over the group as a whole, however, Hypothesis 1 was not supported, at least insofar as no other mothers spoke of their children's verbal abilities in response to the first question of the interview.

Thirteen out of 17 mothers (76%), however, did spontaneously refer to their children's verbal development at some point in the interview. For four mothers the acquisition of language had evidently been such an exciting part of their children's early years that it was one of the first things they mentioned when asked,

"What was s/he like as a baby?" Susan's mother responded:

Delightful! She just had a wonderful disposition, she was always smiling...she started talking very, very young. She was saying, she had maybe a dozen, two dozen words, certainly before she was a year old...

Leslie's mother answered:

Very, as many people said, very mature. She's going through a little regression now, but she was never a googoo gaga baby. She was talking before she was walking, you know, saying words...

John's mother began with:

He spoke...he spoke pretty young. He did one word attempts when--(her child interrupts and the sentence goes unfinished). By the time he was 18, 19 months he knew the whole alphabet...

Demian's mother said:

We always talked about how Demian never seemed like a baby anyway. You know, Demian tried to walk when he was 5 months old and he couldn't do it, so he finally settled for sitting up! And he started talking very early. He never really did any babytalk, so um...he was just never

very babyish. And I don't think he really thought about being babyish. Sometimes he would say, "I'm a smart baby, I did this..." (...) He was always very determined to do everything. He started...speaking in sentences when he was 14 months old....

Shira's mother mentioned her facility with words when she described the beginnings of her imaginary companions:

She's always been very imaginative, she's always been very verbal, and it just seemed another outpouring of her imaginary things. She always played games that involved a lot of talking....

At another point Shira's mother said: "I like talking to her because she's a very verbal kid!" Ann's parents not only described her themselves as having "always been very verbal," they said the teacher of her toddler group had called her "the most verbal child I've ever had." When I asked about reading, Eric's mother went to great lengths to explain her belief that his clear diction and early complete sentences were the result of her having read aloud to him from infancy. Ari's mother made repeated references to his "telling fantastic stories," liking to "hog the conversation," and both "composing" and being "very, very much involved in writing songs and poetry and stuff like that," all at the age of 2. Matthew's mother was the only mother who brought up verbal development which was exceptional in being late in starting, and the subject was clearly of such interest to her that she referred to it not once, but three times without being asked.

In light of the above, it seems reasonable to conclude that even though very few mothers spoke of their children's verbal abilities in their opening remarks, they did as a group emerge more or less

as expected: i.e., sufficiently interested and invested in their children's verbal development to bring it into the conversation without being asked. Had Hypothesis 1 been worded accordingly (Mothers will spontaneously refer...etc....at some point in the interview..."), it would have been fairly well supported.

Hypothesis 2 (N = 17)

According to mothers' recollections, children with imaginary companions will have begun talking in sentences before the age of 2.

As noted above, there was no question in the interview directing mothers to speak about verbal development. Assuming, and hypothesizing, that parents would bring up the subject themselves, I made the mistake of not asking about it systematically. Thirteen mothers did refer to the subject spontaneously, as discussed above, and I did ask the remaining four, after their interviews, "When did your child start to speak?" I did not inquire of any mother, however, when her child began speaking in sentences. Not to have included such a question at the end of each interview was an unfortunate oversight resulting from my naivete as an optimistic researcher who expected everyone to act as hypothesized.

Under the circumstances I think it striking that over half the group (9 mothers) volunteered that their children were speaking in sentences before age two--Demian by 14 months; Alden and Nicole by 15; Susan, Shira, Carolyn, Ann, and Tara by 18 months, and Melissa "well before she was 2." Had I asked the remainder of the group to specify the ages at which their children were speaking in sentences, I believe that most of them would also have given ages

younger than two. Four of these mothers (John's, Eric's, Adam's, and Leslie's) referred to their children as "early" talkers, describing their speech in phrases like "very articulate" and "very mature." Ari's mother described him as having such verbal competence "around 2" that in all likelihood he was speaking in sentences before that age. Randy's mother said he began talking "around 2;" Rachel's mother implied the same for her,¹⁸ so that these two and Matthew, the only child in the group described as a late talker,¹⁹ were the only children in whose cases Hypothesis 2 clearly was not confirmed. Overall then, even though the ages at which sentences were established were not made clear for all children, as a group

¹⁸Rachel's mother mentioned her first words at 6 and 9 months, said she was "saying some" by 18 months, but never went on to discuss the coming together of sentences. She moved instead into a detailed account of Rachel's younger sister's speech development. To the mother's consternation Mandy had not spoken till aged 3; the implicit message was that this was in distinct contrast to Rachel who was more "normal."

¹⁹Matthew did not begin talking until he was nearly 3. His mother referred repeatedly to the distress this delay caused in the family: "He certainly understood! And he's say things like 'no.' You always knew that he understood: he obeyed commands, you know, 'Go get the such and such...' I don't know why he didn't talk. Maybe that's why he needs therapy now, he just had a problem with his tongue, placing his tongue. (Matthew had begun speech therapy at 5.) I mean he'd make noise, he'd try to communicate to a certain extent. And he was really a rotten, miserable little boy and fairly unhappy...These temper tantrums...we just felt so awful for him. Dick used to call it Twenty Questions: I mean you would--we'd know that he was trying desperately to convey something, and you just don't get what it is--saying, 'Is it this?' and 'Is it that?' and 'What about this?' Oh, it was awful, it was really awful! You study English lit and French lit, but it doesn't help you with your own child!"

they emerged as unusually precocious in their verbal development, at least as recalled by their mothers.

Hypothesis 3 (N=16)²⁰

Mothers will have detailed memories of the early words and sentences of the child who has an imaginary companion.

Hypothesis 3 was not well supported, though again difficulties arose because of its wording ("Mothers will have..." rather than "will report..." or "will volunteer...") and because parents were not questioned directly about their memories. Ten mothers (63%) gave evidence of having what I would consider to be such detailed memories. Five of them (Nicole's, Matthew's, Demian's, Ann's, and Melissa's) quoted their children's earliest words and expressions; seven of them (John's, Alden's, Susan's, Leslie's, Ari's, Melissa's, and Ann's) told me about the lists of vocabulary words, the sentences they had written down, and the tape recordings they had made in their fascination with their children's first sounds and speech.

Of the remaining seven mothers all that can be said is that they did not volunteer comparable evidence of having such detailed recollections. Whether they might have reported similar memories had they been asked remains an unanswered question.

The recollections of the ten mothers who did speak about their children's early language are impressive in their detail and for what they reveal about these parents' interest in the subject. Ann's mother, for instance, produced her baby book during the interview and read me the words she knew at her first birthday:

²⁰Tara is not included.

At a year she had a vocabulary of several hundred words. I have a list--we were driving back from Washington and we made a list of all the words that she had, if that would be of any interest to you...because it was...it's apparently very unusual. Pat (her teacher last year) said Ann was the most verbal child she'd ever had. Here...this's on her first birthday: "all gone, up, down, Kookla, hat, dog, duck, roar, pretty, no, yes, mama, daddy, Oscar, bath, ba (bottle), Happy Birthday, night-night, muppet, doll, baby, key, door, pig, block, glasses, bird, walk, money...that's the other thing: she's never really had babytalk; she's always had kind of correct pronunciation...

Melissa's mother also kept a word list until she "couldn't keep up with her after a while."

She was learning like 8, 9, 10 new words a day and it was hard for me to remember whether I'd written them down before or not, but by the time she was 2 I had logged close to 900 words that she had. And I knew that she had more and I just couldn't keep track of them anymore so I gave up at that point. And then I started writing sentences down, because her sentence structure was changing, you know, from the one word to the 2 word thing and now these elaborate sentences. I wrote some down yesterday, wait-- (reaches for paper on bulletin board behind her and reads): "I wonder why it's warm in here?"; "I don't want any more because I'm full!"; "I did it already."

Ari's parents made several tapes of his early babbling and singing ("It was so funny and it would go on for an hour or so...") and when Moey, his imaginary companion, first appeared, his mother said, "We'd put the tape recorder on and start grilling him! And as he got more and more verbal we would grill him more and more..." She also recalled with amazement his ability as a 2-year-old to recognize and name every car as they walked down a city street:

When he was 2 he was able--he cannot do it any more--at 2 he was able as we walked down the street to identify every single car on the street! Mostly foreign--he would sometimes make a mistake with American cars--he never missed on foreign cars no matter what the year or model! Like he would see something go by, when we'd be walking? This was at two, and he would say "Saab!" I mean we don't know

where he got--well, I mean, apparently he must have said to us, "What that car?" And we'd say, "Saab..." or "Plymouth" or something...

Alden's mother habitually wrote down interesting sounds of his, some of which became the names of his imaginary friends:

Names would just hop into his mind, or if he heard a name that struck his fancy, he'd say something like, "Oh, you know I have a child who's named that too!" And when he would play with words and something interesting would come out of his word, when we would be talking or he would say something like...Coggiesarie was a put-together of just syllables that he heard which he named one of his dolls. And when names like that...I would say, "That's a nice name!" or "I like the combination of sounds you've just said, let's write it down so we don't forget it," and he'd say "Oh, I think I'll name one of my children that."

Leslie's father had made movies and tape recordings of her early singing and talking:

She was an actress...a regular old ham. I have some movie film of her singing. That was one of the first things she did, along with talking and expressing herself, would be holding something to her face like a microphone. (...) And I have a tape recorder here, I tried to get her voice on when she was younger, when she first started making a stab at speech. And like you record with a microphone... and I'd put it over the P. A. and let her hear herself. That was when she was very young.

Hypothesis 4 (N=16)

Mothers will report that they or their husbands began reading aloud or telling stories to the child with the imaginary companion before s/he was 12 months old.

Hypothesis 4 was very strongly supported. Thirteen of the 16 mothers (81% of the group) reported that they had started reading or telling stories when their children were well under a year old. Two mothers (Randy's and Carolyn's) thought they had begun "at" or "about a year old." Only one child (Demian) was described as having no interest in books until he could read them himself.

Leslie's mother said, "I'm sure she wasn't a year old yet," when she began reading her Golden books. Susan's mother started her on Mother Goose when she was "way under a year." Shira, Alden, Adam, Melissa, and Ann were all between 7 and 10 months old when their mothers or fathers began reading or telling them stories. The remaining 6 mothers described themselves as having "always" read or talked to their children from earliest infancy. Rachel's mother laughed at my question: "Start reading to her? Probably at one month or something like that!" Matthew's mother had regularly read aloud to his older brother while nursing Matthew "so he started, I mean literally, when he was born." John's mother said:

Well, I guess I always told him little stories and stuff, you know, just from...I think I've read to them since a year ago, maybe 13, 14 months. But I think I...even when I was holding him I'd be talking, saying some little stories. Actually reading...my husband and I are both freaks, that's one of our favorite escapes and...or elevations! (Laughs) So I think that, you know, we just naturally tend to read to them.

Eric's mother gave an especially rich account of her reading to Eric and of its place in their early relationship.

Oh yes! Yes, I read to him, yeah! (...) Even when he was an infant in a high chair and I'm bored to death.. it's raining outside, can't ride the bike, can't go for a stroll to solicit other parents and children, and I would take out a magazine and because he was there I would read it out loud. It might be Redbook or it might be a cookbook or whatever, but I would read it out loud because...I don't know, when I read to him he would not, "buh buh buh buh..." He would listen, I think. And when he started talking, you know, his sentences came right away--not "This...that...cat..." but "This is the cat." And I think that came from my reading to him.

It is clear from these mothers that reading or story-telling not only began early for most of these children, it was also a highly pleasur-

able activity for both parent and child. Five other mothers refer to themselves or their husbands (as John's mother did above) as "readers" or people who especially enjoy books and stories. Nicole's mother regularly attended story-telling events on Friday nights, often returning to tell Nicole the stories she had heard. Eleven parents specially referred to their children as "loving to listen," "always enjoying," or "begging for more" stories. Even Shira's mother, who admitted that she might have overdone it,²¹ described her daughter at 10 months saying, "She used to listen, she liked the sound of things."

Hypothesis 5 (N=16)

In describing the bedtime routines of the child who has an imaginary companion, mothers will mention one or more of the following sound-filled experiences as occurring just prior to the child's going to sleep: a) story-telling, b) reading aloud, c) singing or humming, d) talking with parents.

Hypothesis 5 was very strongly supported. Fourteen of the sixteen children (88%) were described as having bedtime routines which included stories, singing, or talking. Only two children were des-

²¹Shira's mother reported that she had begun reading Mother Goose rhymes to her at 10 months, but by the time her imaginary companion had emerged she had "rebelled against it." "At that age she wouldn't let me. I tried very hard; I'm an English teacher and, really, I didn't want to be obnoxious about it, but I tried to read. And she wasn't interested. She would take the book and pretend, you know, to make up a story, but she didn't want me to read. Or she would talk while I was trying to read to her, so I stopped. Eventually, she started asking me to read and now she's very much into reading.

cribed otherwise.²²

Of the fourteen children whose bedtime routines were as hypothesized there were nine for whom this was emphatically true. What their mothers described went well beyond a single customary bedtime story and good night kiss: these children's parents read or told them 2 or 3 stories, sang lullabies, rubbed backs, and lay beside their children talking, often for 45 minutes to an hour or more. Some spoke ruefully about the fact that they seemed to spend the entire evening putting their children to sleep. Susan's mother said laughingly that her bedtime now took upwards of 45 minutes because

...we read her a story or two, we brush her teeth, and... sometime about a year and a half ago my husband unfortunately got into the habit of lying in and telling her stories or talking to her after we turn the lights off...

Ari's mother remarked:

I remember saying to myself, "How can we wind this down?" You know, it was two stories and two songs...

²²Matthew's mother said that his family had "never really had a very lovely rite or...story kind of thing," largely because there were two boys who wanted different stories, and who, therefore, were read to at other times in the day. As mentioned in the discussion of Hypothesis 4, however, Matthew did spend his infancy nursing and falling asleep to the sounds of his mother reading aloud to his brother; hence, his bedtimes early in life were as hypothesized. Demian's mother never apparently established a bedtime routine at all. She described his bedtime as "murder" because he would be "out around twenty times a night with one thing after another." As far as a bedtime story was concerned she said: "If he stays up late and watches television, he's worse; if he has a story it doesn't seem to help any; a bath before bedtime doesn't help any either..."

Randy's mother said that talking to him and settling him down was a "good 45 minute deal" which took place, not once, but two or three times each night, whenever he woke up!

For the most part, however, parents conveyed the attitude that they enjoyed and that their youngsters were entitled to such a time of closeness at bedtime. Nicole's parents, for instance, not only read to her, they took turns with her stories in accordance with her preferences and they stayed with her until she was comfortable:

There are certain stories she prefers me to read and certain stories she prefers him to read. Like she thinks he does Cookie Monster's voice much better than I do, for example. We try very much to give different voices to the different characters... (...) She needed for a long time to have more than one story read, and to... you know...she needed someone to stay with her, plus the night light, and there were a lot of things before she'd go to sleep and it took a long time.

Melissa's mother was just as involved:

By 9:30 or 10:00 she's in the crib and, um...she wants some stories. So I'll usually read her 2 or 3 stories, or Larry will. And then lights go off and I'll sit with her and, you know, sing to her, rub her back or whatever...

Recently her singing had "reached this highpoint of singing twenty songs" before Melissa would let her go and they were in the midst of experimenting with having Melissa's father put her to bed instead. He, instead of singing, would read to her and play his guitar.

For many of these children parts of their sound-filled bedtime routines had been initiated in early infancy. Melissa's lullabies dated from the time she was nursed and rocked to sleep. Shira's routine of a story followed by a prayer and a lullaby had begun when

she was 10 months old. Ann's father put her to bed every night with the "same two super simple stories" he claimed he began telling her when she was barely 9 months old. Rachel's mother, too, said that she had been read to from very early on and she added, "I mean that was strictly part of the routine of settling down (at bedtime) was always a story!"

In addition to the hypothesized sound-filled activities which parents initiated at bedtime, it was interesting to find how many of the children, from their end, resorted to verbal or other auditory means of coping with or fighting off the onset of sleep. Four mothers (Ari's, Shira's, Eric's, and Melissa's) mentioned that from infancy their children had talked or sung to themselves while falling asleep. Eric's mother said:

Bedtime really wasn't much of a problem. I would hear him talking in there to himself, um...making funny noises, singing against the walls.

The most striking description came from Ari's mother who clearly described his use of singing and sounds as a self-soother:

He's always sung to himself after he's gotten into bed. He did that--he's always sung himself to sleep. And-- I don't know if this has anything to do with imaginary friends but--when he was an infant he would always cry when we put him to bed? And at first, of course, we were very anxious about it. And we realized that he was a kid who had to get over a hump? It wasn't that he was unhappy...that cry gave way to singing? But it was always this transition, like we'd put him in bed, he'd lie there when he was tiny, when he was like 2 weeks old or a month old or...I guess a month old or 6 weeks... he would cry, cry, and then it would just--it wouldn't wind down and down--he would cry and then it would stop. He was over the hump and he'd fall asleep, the next morning he'd be fine. Then, when he discovered singing and sounds, he never cried! I mean he got into bed and everything and

then he would sing! And he'd like sing and suddenly he'd be asleep. And he's always done it. He kind of goes over songs he's learned and--it sounds bizarre now, now that he's listening to Bob Dylan, you know? I mean to somebody who doesn't know it would sound--I can imagine!--because he'll sing like, "I saw a white man with a black dog; I saw a lady who was in flames; I saw..." because "A Hard Rain's Gonna Fall" has all this imagery that is so macabre. And he loves it, I mean he just loves it!

In addition to singing or talking to themselves, children filibustered with protests, questions, excuses, and stories of their own to put off having to go to sleep. As Ann's father said:

It's rare that she'll just say, "Tell me a story..." and then I'll tell her a story and she goes off. She'll... after we get all finished with the whole routine and I leave, I'll hear, "Dad...I want to tell you a story," or "I want to tell you something," and I'll be going down the hall saying, "Tell me..." But it's, "No, no, come back here," and I'll go back and she'll tell me something very innocuous.

Adam, too, was described by his mother and housekeeper as a master at using his words to fend off bedtime:

We read one story and then of course he talks...you know? He'll give me a kiss and then he'll rub it away, and then he wants another kiss, and then he'll rub it away... and then he wants to know about my son Anthony and my daughter Karen, and he wants to know about Tony, you know, and he wants--I mean, if Adam had his way, he'd be up all night! As long as he can string you along talking! Talking and stories, and all of that.

Hypothesis 6 (N=16)

In describing the methods of limit-setting and discipline they use with the child who has an imaginary companion mothers will specifically refer to what they tell or say to him/her, be it in the form of explanation, gentle reminder, threat, recrimination, or rebuke.

Hypothesis 6 was very strongly supported. It was clear that every parent interviewed relied, at least in part, on verbal exchange in disciplining or setting limits with these children. Of the six-

teen, ten mothers actually quoted their typical disciplinary remarks or examples of what they had said in specific situations.²³ One mother (Alden's) even quoted seven different ways in which she might have asked her son to turn off the TV! The remaining six mothers all referred to their ways of setting limits or disciplining their children in words which made it obvious these were verbal methods, e.g., "scolding," "persuading," "negotiating," and "trying to explain." Half the group (8 mothers) explicitly discussed their feelings about the importance of "reasoning," "explaining," or "talking things through."

Some parents were almost surprised by my question about how they handled setting limits, as if the answer were so obvious it needn't have been asked. Susan's mother replied:

Why, we tell her! And we try to talk about things so that she knows that we're not necessarily being arbitrary...though I think you can talk a child to death. (...) Sometimes Peter says I talk too much, you know, explaining why she shouldn't do something...

Others, like Adam's mother, were quite passionate about their policies:

We expect him just to be pleasant and we don't really have confrontations, we don't really yell or shriek. (...) When he gets too cranky we say, "Adam, stop that! I can't bear it when you whine, please don't do that." But whatever I say--and I've never talked down to him and Frances (his babysitter) doesn't talk down to him, I mean we've never talked babytalk--we always reason with him. And now he reasons back to us...

²³I include examples which came up through the interview, i.e., not just in response to the question about discipline per se.

Some parents saw their children as needing the explanations:

We never really prohibit her from doing anything without trying to have some explanation for it. (...) She needs reasons...which she'll get. She seems to really want to know why, "Why can't I do this or that? (...) You know, people say, "Oh, you just can't explain things to a 2 year old, they just don't understand." It's just not true! I mean even way before she was 2, she really knew why she couldn't do something and she would tell...she would reiterate that: "I can't climb the stairs 'cause I might fall down..." or not so much that because we wouldn't tell her 'you might fall down,' but, "You have to be very careful because you could fall and you would get hurt if you did because of the floor." (Melissa's mother)

For other parents their policy of reasoning with their children was based on a deliberate decision to alter what they had not liked in their own upbringings:

We have our back and forth, debating, "Why do I have to do that? And I have never said, "Because I said so!" Because my mother said it to me and I didn't like it, so I put myself in his place and I say, "Well, Eric...can we sit down and talk about this later, why you should do this? Will you just do it now and we'll talk about it later?" And he'll say, "Okay." Sure enough, two hours later he'll remind me and we'll talk about it. (Eric's mother)

She doesn't get hit too often...because we both don't... we try to talk. (...) We both know how it is to be hit...we don't want to have a relationship with her where she listens because she's afraid we're going to pound down on her. We give her a lot of freedom, we give her choices...which I have been criticized for. In other words, "You don't give a child a choice between what vegetable they're going to have, you just cook one and set it there." I don't approve of this. I say she's a person. I don't say to her, "Would you like broccoli or chocolate cake?" I say, "Would you like "broccoli or string beans?" (Leslie's mother)

Even other parents who admitted they sometimes hit or slapped their children--there were three others besides Leslie's: Randy's, Nicole's, and Shira's--said they did so only after or in addition

to talking:

I try not to hit him, you know, if I can help it. I try talking to him...like as far as his toys go, picking up his toys at the end of the day and putting them away? That seems to be the hardest thing for him to do. Typical procrastinator! He'll keep on saying he'll do it and he'll do it and finally I will say to him, "Listen, Randy, you have five minutes and if those toys are not picked up, I will pick them up and take them away and you won't get them back." (Randy's mother)

I very seldom hit her, and um the time that I hit her is if she hits me. Usually I don't believe in hitting a child, but when I'm hit...you know, so I will usually hold her hand and slap it, harder than she hit me so that...you know. And that really is a very difficult thing for her to deal with. She's like...you know... I'll say to her, "If it's wrong it's wrong for me to hit you, but it's wrong for you to hit me." Usually I try to explain to her why. (...) She gets extremely upset if I tell her I'm angry at her, and now that's-- as she's gotten older it's much easier, because just saying "I'm angry!" really upsets her. In fact she will ask me, "Do you still love me?" and I'll say, "I still love you, but I'm angry..." and then it's, "I don't like you when you're angry," and I'll say, "Well, then you shouldn't do things to make me angry. I don't like when you throw mashed potatoes at the dog...or whatever it was that she did." And then we'll go back and forth talking about it. (Nicole's mother)

In four families not only the children but their imaginary friends were drawn into the parents' talk about limits and discipline. When Ari's parents were angry at him, they would ask him what he "would do with his (imaginary) kids" under similar circumstances. Randy's mother often scolded Kalkit and Dumindumin in the course of putting an unwilling Randy to bed let they "bother him by not listening." Leslie's parents frequently told Leslie to reprimand Brother for cursing, and Ann's had to keep after her to keep after her companion, Laugh. Ann's mother had the following to say about the dilemmas she faced when Laugh was naughty:

The naughty thing is interesting, because it really does deflect it terribly. I mean sometimes it's a whole glass of Pepsi all over the couch or something, I mean, they're irritating things! But you really can't--I'm not about to say, "You did it! I know you did it!" you know? You just don't know what to do, so you try...I try to say, "Well, you'll just have to be responsible for Laugh, I mean she's your friend after all!" (...) And I'm always saying, "You'll have to tell Laugh, she'll have to straighten up her act. This can't go on!"

Even when mothers did not quote themselves extensively in the course of the interviews, it was implicitly clear that discipline was a verbal business. Demian's mother spoke of "trying to persuade him" and of "talking to him about cooperating." Matthew's mother's idiomatic references to "something we've had words about" and "something he's been yelled at for" suggested that their confrontations took place in words. John's mother said, "He really tries to figure out what we're talking about, and you know, he's willing to make compromises." Discussion and negotiation were typical, though mothers' attitudes toward them varied widely. Carolyn's mother rather enjoyed the process:

She's always been very reasonable, very easy to convince... until she became 4 when she realized she didn't have to do it anymore! But that I think was much harder on me than on her because I had had this wonderfully reasonable child who I could always talk into anything! As long as I was fair, you know. I'd try to be fair and we'd explain it to her and she would usually pretty much go along. (But now) she's always negotiating. And I keep telling her not to negotiate and I realize that we do negotiate constantly! It's just that she should know when I don't want to! And how would she?

Demian's mother found it exhausting:

Discipline with him is always really difficult! He's the kind of kid who will keep after you and keep after you, on and on, and...it's difficult. It's like putting him to

bed, you know, it's 20 times. And he does that if he wants something, he's going to ask you 20 times and just because you said, "No," to one thing doesn't mean that he can't have a slight variation!

Even in Rachel's family, where the latitudes of permissible negotiation were clearly much narrower, it was clear that rule-making and rule-changing were verbal activities:

I know what I can tolerate and there's no begging. If I say, "No," it's no. If you want to give me some reasons why you think I should change my mind, I will listen to some reasons, but none of this, "C'mon, please Mommy..."

Hypothesis 7 (N=16)

In describing their handling of separations mothers will specifically refer to "talking about it" or to what they "told" the child who has the imaginary companion.

Hypothesis 7 was not strongly supported. Slightly over half the group, nine mothers, behaved as hypothesized, either quoting remarks they had made at or prior to times of separation, or describing themselves as always, deliberately preparing their children by discussing separations with them beforehand.

Four mothers described such deliberate policies. The following were typical remarks:

We always tried to tell her where we were going, what we were going to be doing, and that we would be back...
(Rachel's mother)

We...any separation, I guess, like I tell him beforehand, you know, the best I can. Depending on the length and the type...like who he's going to stay with. If my mother's coming to stay with him, then I can tell him and he'll relish the idea of my leaving! If it's something else... whatever, but I usually try and explain it to him beforehand. (John's mother)

We try to prepare her. We've never, even when she was a baby--if Kendall and I were going out and someone was keeping her, we wouldn't say, "well, she's occupied over

there now so we'll go now." We told her, "We are going now and we'll be back," and this has always worked very well, being prepared. Even with the sitter saying, "She's not looking, go now," we never did it that way, and we think that the way we've handled it has been beneficial because even now that sense of security is there. She knows, she never says to us, "Are you coming back?" because we've always told her, "We're going now, we may be gone a long time, but we'll be back." And we like to, as much as we possibly can, prepare her for where we're going, where she's going, and what's going to happen to her...and the truth, in every situation. (Leslie's mother)

Alden's mother spoke of handling the separations involved in being weaned and in making room for a new sibling:

He loved his bottle but it just left his life at 22 months. I explained to him as best I could, at the level I thought he was ready for, what I was doing and why I was doing it...

He was also more accepting of an explanation (after a baby brother was born). I thought he'd be bothered by having to wait for things which he was used to having delivered on the spot. And I...so I tested a few times and he tested out beautifully, when I would give him an explanation of... For example, "I would be very glad to read to you. I want very much to read to you if you will wait until I have nursed Justin and put him back to sleep. Then we will be able to read, then we'll have time together. We'll be able to read a longer book and it'll be easier going. If you can wait it will be better."

Nicole's and Ari's mothers quoted remarks they had made in coping with their children's occasional reluctance to go to school. Adam's mother described him as "filing away" and later reiterating her words, "Mommy's coming back at 4 o'clock," in helping himself to deal with her daily departures to work. Melissa's and Randy's mothers both mentioned "constantly reassuring" their children that they would return whenever separations occurred. Randy's mother even quoted extensively from conversations she had held with him in trying to help him stay alone in his room when he was feeling afraid of being by himself.

The seven mothers who did not describe themselves as handling separations in such verbal ways all responded to the question, "How have you handled separations from your child?" by discussing not how they, but how their children had managed them. Some went to great lengths to deny that their children "had been a problem," and it was clear that this aspect of separation was so compelling that they may never have heard the question literally at all. To have followed it with a second question, asking more specifically how mothers had handled separations, would have been, I thought, "leading the witness." Some of these mothers may well have been talkers-in-the-face-of-separations even though they did not so describe themselves in the interview. Susan's and Shira's mothers, for instance, were two of those who did not mention verbally preparing their children for separations, yet both described how times of talking together had been instituted as a way of helping their children cope with bedtime (a time of separation) after each had had a difficult time at night.²⁴ It seems probable that parents who were so inclined to soothe with words in these situations would also do so in the face of other separations. Observation of children who have imaginary companions going through an actual separation from their mothers, however, would afford a more reliable measure of mothers' talkativeness at such times.

²⁴Susan's father began staying and "talking with her after the lights go out" after she had been frightened waking too far from her parents in an unfamiliar house. Shira's ritual (story, prayer, and lullaby) was instituted when she was 10 months old to banish nightmares.

VI. Discussion

While not all hypotheses received strong support, the overall findings of the study do, I believe, very much confirm its main thesis that the early parent-child relationship of the child with an imaginary companion is one in which verbal and other sound-filled experiences have been a central feature. The reasons why some hypotheses were not strongly supported have been touched on above. Some were not well formulated; Hypothesis 1 is a prime example. In retrospect, there seems no compelling reason to have believed that mothers--no matter how impressed by their children's verbal ability--would be any more likely to refer to it in answering the first question than in answering the fifth or the nineteenth, given that none of the questions directed their attention to the topic. (The first hypothesis was formulated as it was because two of the first "pilot" mothers happened to mention how verbal their children were in their opening remarks.) The important element, however, was the spontaneity of any references to verbal abilities, wherever they occurred, as it reflected sufficient interest in the subject to bring it up even when one was not asked. Had Hypothesis 1 read, "Mothers will spontaneously refer to their children's verbal abilities at some point during the interview," it would have been supported by 3/4 of the group. Had the interview included more specific questions, at the end, about verbal development, more mothers might have provided the information with which Hypotheses 2 and 3 were concerned. In the case of Hypothesis 7, an interview format

was simply not well suited to revealing whether mothers actually rely on verbalization in handling separations. When asked how they handled separations, many mothers, as discussed above, answered in terms of their children rather than themselves. Hence, while the hypothesis (that they would "specifically refer to 'talking about it' or to what they 'told' the child...") was not confirmed, the underlying supposition that parents of children who develop imaginary friends are talkers-in-the-face-of-separation was not adequately tested.

Overall, however, the data certainly support the notion that the parents of children who develop imaginary companions are verbal people who especially enjoy verbal interaction with these children. They also suggest that there are more ways in which verbal and other sound-filled experiences become important in different parent-child pairs than I had foreseen. First, it was apparent that not only mothers are influential in shaping such sound-filled interactions; in some families fathers, and sometimes housekeepers, seemed just as important. Secondly, not all parents manifested their investment in these children's verbal development in the same ways, or in the ways that I hypothesized. Third, the interviews provide evidence suggesting that it may be less their verbal handling of distressing times (e.g., discipline, separations) than their talkativeness in intimate and pleasurable moments which is a distinguishing feature of parents of children with imaginary companions. Fourth, the interviews provide extensive data affirming that the children are unusually verbal in their own right, suggesting

that it might be important to consider the extent to which they--as distinct from their parents--might be responsible for verbal and/or other sound-filled interactions taking on such importance. Fifth, the interviews suggest that in my thinking about the auditory aspects of the child's relationship with his parents, I focussed too narrowly on verbalization and speech, failing to anticipate the felicitous finding that music, too, would turn out to play a significant role for many. Finally, in some interviews parents spoke of their own tendencies to talk or sing to themselves when alone in ways which prompted me to speculate whether in general children who invent imaginary companions might not also be conceived of as adopting a parental mode of defense against feelings of loss or loneliness, i.e., by turning to sounds to "keep oneself company" while alone. In the following discussion I shall take up each of these points in greater detail, then, in closing, address the questions about other aspects of the imaginary companion phenomenon which were raised at the outset and consider the limitations of the study and the indications for further research.

Fathers and Housekeepers as Verbal Caretakers

While in designing and carrying out the study I conceived of mothers as the parents who significantly shaped the hypothesized sound-filled relationships with children who eventually develop imaginary companions, it may already be apparent to the reader that some fathers also played a key role in this regard. Three fathers were interested enough in talking about their children's imaginary companions to choose to be present along with their wives in the

interview. In Ann's, Adam's, and Susan's families father were the ones who put them to bed with involved routines of stories and talk. Rachel's father customarily read aloud to her, and it was he who, according to Rachel's mother, complained: "I've read to her! I read to her every night and here she is eighteen months old and she's still not talking to me!" Leslie, Carolyn, and Susan all had fathers who were deeply involved in their imaginary play and who spent long periods of time conversing with them.²⁵ Randy's and Leslie's fathers, both present for the interview, were among the parents who said that what they "enjoyed most" about their children who had imaginary companions was "the things they say." In the two families where there were housekeepers who assumed a large part of the care of the children it was interesting that both housekeepers also emerged as unusually talkative women. Adam's babysitter Frances was present during the interview and she joined in constantly to add her two cents to everything Adam's mother had to say! Tara's housekeeper, according to her mother, was a Portuguese woman who had talked to Tara continually in Portuguese and from whom as a 2-year-old Tara had learned several songs and stories in Portuguese which her parents could not understand.

Different Manifestations of Parents' Investment in Their Children's Verbal Development

While every parent interviewed emerged as highly invested in the verbal development of the child with the imaginary companion, not

²⁵See p. 89 for further details.

all of them manifested this, as the "pilot" subjects had, by stressing how articulate and verbally precocious their children had been. Several were obviously proud of and fascinated by their children's verbal achievements and, as discussed above, talked about them quite spontaneously and at length. For others, their interest and investment in their children's language was quieter, perhaps less conscious, though no less keen. It was apparent in the way they savoured the words their children had learned or invented and in the pleasure they took in sharing anecdotes about funny things they had said. Carolyn's parents, for instance, delighted in her invention of "tummysnuggle" as a name for a frontwards piggyback. Alden's mother illustrated his "lovely capacity for fantasy" with the following:

He told us one time the most wonderful story about a germ, that he didn't get a particular illness because the germ entered and he has something which he gave this wonderful word, "correga," which was obviously an influence from having heard Spanish words on Via Allegra or whatever, and he rolled his R and he said it was like a heart only it's like a trampoline for germs: "The germ comes down and bounces off my correga and hops right back out!"

Rachel's mother smilingly remembered how on the even of her first trip away from home she had played with their expression "butterflies in your stomach," saying, "Uh oh...another one just hatched!... Ohhh...another chrysalis!" Both of Ann's parents joined in recalling her funny expressions:

(Father:) What did she say the other night when we came in? "I had a wonderful evening," or something?

(Mother:) "I had a lovely night!"

(Father:) Isn't that marvelous? "I had a lovely night!"

(Mother:) And you know one time when I was at a high-point of meetings--I mean I was just complaining daily

of all the meetings I had to go to--one time during that period she had a little friend over and he did something that made her mad and she said, "You better watch it or I'm going to lock you in a meeting!"

No evidence of these parents' investment in their children's verbal development, however, was more convincing than their own words about the pleasure it brought them. From Melissa's mother's delight in her first babblings:

She would just lie in bed and burble, you know, the cooing and the sounds? You know, the sounds, words...when she was starting to get words she'd be practicing words, and we'd go to the door and listen. We'd just hear her saying words, so cute! You know, the whole amazement of a kid picking up words and learning every day some new things...

to Adam's mother's remark, "You know, it gives me great joy to hear him verbalize things so well!" many of these parents were really thrilled by the things their children said. Though I included the last question of the interview, "What would you say you enjoy most about your child?" without any clear expectation of how mothers might answer it, I was genuinely surprised at how many of them replied with words to the effect of "the things s/he says." Ten of the sixteen answered this way. I found their answers so striking that I include them all below. Shira's mother:

Now? (I enjoy) when she talks to me on an adult level which she does often. You know, she'll ask questions or she'll discuss something or someone that we met. I love her memory! She can dig up things that happened 2 years ago...even more, and ask me about them. (...) And I enjoy that kind of stuff. I like talking to her because she's a very verbal kid.

Demian's mother:

At this point I think I like the things he says. He was

at his friend's house a couple of weeks ago. And they were getting really wild and his friend's father said something about--I think he yelled at them--and Demian says, "That's it, I'm calling my father!" And he walked over to the telephone and he called us and he said, "Daddy, can I sleep over?" He was over there this afternoon and he wanted to have dinner, so he told Diane, "I really like your cooking. Make some of that soup, the one you put carrots in." He's always saying something like that!

Nicole's mother:

Hmmm...that's a difficult one. Mostly her conversation, I have to say that. You know, I really do...And her explanations for things...

Randy's parents:

(Mother:) The things that he says! (Father:) Yes! the things he comes out with, I get such a kick out of that, just listening to the things he comes out with. (Mother:) I mean yesterday I bought him--we were in the supermarket and I bought him a Sesame Street book and he was holding the book and he just said to me, "Mommy, I appreciate that you bought me this book." And I just thought, you know... to me, I don't know, somebody else might think I was crazy, but to me, I thought that was so adorable! Yes, the things he comes out with. I can't even remember half of them, but he keeps us laughing. (Father:) This morning I made cereal for him and myself and I made some toast for myself, and I asked him, "Would you like a piece of bread and jelly? Or what do you want?" He said "I'll take bread and jelly..." and then, "Oh wait! Just a second, I'll take toast!" and it just cracked me up.

Leslie's father:

...There's something about her that...it's hard to express. She has a freedom, a frankness, a truth about her. She'll let it come out, she'll say it!

Adam's mother:

He's such good company! He's so funny and he talks a lot. He's just fun...you know, I...it gives me great joy to hear him verbalize things so well. Like in the morning I'll say, "Do you want some cereal?" And he'll say, "No, I think I'd prefer some grapefruit and toast." Now I've been saying to him for the last 6 months, "Would you prefer grapefruit or toast?" Whatever I say--and I've never

talked down to him and Frances doesn't talk down to him, I mean we've never talked babytalk. We always reason with him and now he reasons back to us, and I think that's a joy; don't you?

Susan's mother:

She's got this great exuberance for everything and she's always asking wonderful questions and, you know... the little wheels are turning all the time...

For Alden's, Matthew's, and Eric's mothers it was the shared occasions of talking rather than simply what their children said which they enjoyed:

Alden's mother:

Ohhhh...ohhh...I can't say just one thing! I enjoy Alden as a person, I look forward to seeing him at times like after school, really look forward to seeing him, love to talk to him, love to go places in the car with him when we can talk...

Matthew's mother:

He's good company! He's funny...I mean, last vacation--he really learned to ski last winter--we took a whole week and went to Mt. Snow, and I was 7 and $\frac{1}{2}$ months pregnant so I was not going to ski Jaws of Death or Widowmaker or...And Matt and I were taking virtually all the intermediate trails, I mean all the way to the top and coming down, slowly. And we'd talk all the way up and, you know, it's a long ride in the gondola! We'd just...he's good company! He's bright, he's imaginative, he grasps concepts...

Eric's mother:

His imagination...I don't know...I had Eric when I was 26 and I was older then, when I was pregnant, than I am now. Because having Eric has made me younger. Going to the park is fun. (...) We pack peanut butter and jelly sandwiches and we talk to squirrels. I'm a 31-year-old woman talking to a squirrel! But I enjoy it. Now when I was 26 years old I would have been embarrassed for somebody to see me talking to a squirrel--"That's really crazy!" Getting back to your question, what do I like most about Eric--I just like him, everything about him 'cause he's really a nice guy, he's a very nice person.

We have our back and forth debating, "Why do I have to do that?" and I say, "Well, Eric, can we sit down and talk about this later, why you should do this? Will you just do it now and we'll talk about it later?" And he'll say okay. Sure enough, two hours later he'll remind me and we'll talk about it.

Pleasure and Intimacy in a "Context of Sound"

The responses noted above illustrate well the feature of the parent-child relationship with which this study is concerned as they exemplify how experiences of intimacy and pleasure, of being together-with-mother, occur in a context of sound. Insofar as parents of children with imaginary companions are the "talking caretakers" I imagined them to be, it now seems to me that it is this quality, their verbal presence in pleasurable, intimate moments, which is their significant and distinguishing feature. In understanding the imaginary companion as an auditory transitional object evoked by a child at times of narcissistic vulnerability, e.g., when facing separations or disciplinary action, I had at first thought it was his mother's typically verbal handling of these situations, i.e., the auditory experience of her presence as limit-setter or soother-in-the-face-of-separation which the child evoked in interacting with his imaginary companion at such moments. As the discussion of Hypothesis 6 indicates there is certainly evidence that these parents rely on the spoken word in setting limits and disciplining their children. How much this distinguishes them from other parents whose children do not invent imaginary companies, however, is a worthwhile question; I suspect the answer, if it were tested, would be "not significantly." The evidence that parents of children with imagin-

ary companions handle separations by talking was even less impressive, though there were difficulties in engaging parents in talking about this subject. The evidence that these children enjoyed times of closeness, many originating in infancy, associated with the sounds of their parents' voices does seem impressive. I believe it makes more sense to conceptualize the child interacting with his imaginary companions as surrounding himself with sounds which evoke the auditory experience of being close to mother, i.e., that it is the mother-as-talker-in-moments-of-pleasurable-intimacy rather than the mother-as-verbalizer-of-controls, say, whose presence is re-experienced by a child when he talks to or about his imaginary friend.

For many of these children experiences of being surrounded by their mothers' voices began quite literally when they were babes in arms. Matthew's mother habitually read aloud to his older brother while nursing Matthew and when not reading, she talked to him. When I asked if he had been the kind of baby who was particularly sensitive to any kinds of stimuli, she shook her head but then added:

He liked being held, and he liked the warmth, and he liked being talked to while he was nursed...

At another point in the interview she described her talking further:

I've always talked, though....I mean Stewart (Matthew's 4-month-old younger brother) doesn't talk at all, of course, and I chat to him all the time. It doesn't matter what I say. He's got tibular torsion which is from being like this in the uterus? And there's an exercise (...) I'm supposed to do every time I change his diapers for 60 seconds. Well, so counting to 60 amuses him. I mean 32 is just the funniest thing he's ever heard kind of thing! You know, just counting out loud, anything you say. It's the tone of voice, I guess, and the eye contact that they're responding to, but it's hysterical. I mean it's really funny!

John's mother told me:

I guess I always told him little stories and stuff... even when I was holding him I'd be talking, saying some little stories...and I'd sing too...

Nicole's mother, in answering my question about when she had started reading to Nicole, described herself very similarly:

I've always talked to her, you know...which is probably why she is so verbal...but I've always talked to her and so has Michael, for that matter. So has everybody. (...) And my mother is another one who makes up songs, and so does Michael's mother. Michael's mother makes up songs, you know, just as you go along, rhymes or songs or something of that sort when you're changing the baby or whenever...so that she's always responded to that. Anything that's sing-song, you know, poetry, or music, or whatever she just loves. She'll listen to it for hours.

Melissa's mother described herself as always talking or singing to her as a baby. And Ari's mother did the same. She said:

I nursed for a long time and I'd sit by the window in his room and I'd nurse and I'd sing to him...

As these children grew, their early experiences of intimacy enveloped in sounds persisted in changing forms. At bedtime, especially, almost all of them continued to enjoy a time of closeness with one or both of their parents reading, talking, or singing to them. Often their bedtime routines included the same stories or lullabies they had heard as infants, and while no longer held in their mothers' arms, some had parents who lay beside them singing or talking till they drifted off to sleep. The high number of parents who claimed to have begun reading to their children before they were a year old (all but one by 12 months and well over half the group well before that!) certainly suggest that intimate experiences around books

figured importantly for most of them as well.²⁶

While parents were asked in the interview to talk about bedtime routines and reading aloud, they were not asked about other times of talking with their children. Consequently, I found it all the more interesting that in so many interviews times of family intimacy especially associated with talking were mentioned. Alden's mother, for instance, was prompted by a question about TV watching to speak quite fervently about her resentment of TV for cutting into time for conversation "on all levels, not just mother-child." She went on to speak of how much she valued the early mornings when she and Alden, who tended to get up before the others, "would exchange conversation." Adam's mother referred to the time at the end of the

²⁶In the course of the interview Melissa's mother happened to describe an interesting habit of Melissa's which she (the mother) was somewhat puzzled by. I quote her remarks because I thought they provided a fascinating glimpse into the way in which books and physical intimacy might have become associated in this two-year-old's mind. I had just asked the mother if Melissa ever consulted or got permission from her imaginary companions before doing something her mother had asked. She replied: "No, but you know what that makes me think of...Sometimes I'll ask her for something and she'll say to me, "Wait a minute, I got to go get a book!" And she'll run up and get a book and do whatever I asked or whatever...I'm trying to think, I'm not clear what that is...(and the book is not to read, necessarily?) No, she'll get the book for me: "Wait! I'll get you a book," she'll say... and I'll say, "I don't want a book, I wanted you to do something else..." or whatever, but she'll go and get a book first. (What kind of a thing will you be asking her to do?)...That's interesting...Often when I ask for some...for some affection...If I ask her, "Can I have a kiss?" or "Can I hold you?" Then it's, "I'll be right back, I get a book!" and she goes off and she gets the book. (And then what will happen?) Then she might come over and give me a kiss.... (Does she give the book to you?) That's a good question...I don't...I guess I don't-- I often say, "What's she doing bringing me a book? I want attention here!" so I guess I don't pay that much attention to the book, but yeah, she'll offer it to me, say "This is for you," you know, that she got it for me...

day, when he watched Sesame Street and she read the paper, as their time for "cuddling and talking." Three mothers mentioned cartrips as always having been times of family conversation, story-telling, and singing. In Carolyn's family they were filled with pleas for stories about when their parents had been little.

Matthew's mother said:

We've always talked in the car, always done stuff. That's how Timmy learned his multiplication tables, back and forth in the car. It's always been conversation the whole way with everyone sort of having a turn, and Matthew's turn was always Andrew (his imaginary companion)....

Shira's mother said:

Shira sings a lot....Alan's very musical, my husband, and I think it's in the car we always sang... We do a lot of singing. They sing Bingo all the time, and Ring-Around-a-Rosie and London Bridge even without playing it. Shira's into singing Hebrew songs a lot...Yeah, we do a lot of singing....

Ari's, Demian's, and Nicole's mothers mentioned the dinner hour specifically as a time when the family came together and talked. Demian's mother even wondered aloud whether he had invented his imaginary companion "because he had to have something to tell his brother at meal time when his brother was talking about who he saw and what he did today." In four families parents participated to a great extent in these children's dramatic play providing another instance of parent-child intimacy in the context of extensive conversation. Leslie's parents were the most elaborate in

their descriptions of what this entailed.²⁷ Not only while at home, but when waiting for elevators, riding the bus, or walking along the street in any "in-between" moment, Leslie would take on imaginary identities and assign, her mother especially, parts and dialogue to go along. Both parents followed her direction in dramatizing most of the stories she read. Her father called these "stagings;" he could not even remember when they had begun, but from early on he had made a point of tape recording her singing and talking at such times. He also was in the habit of narrating "her moves," rather like a TV master of ceremonies, over the P. A. system of his hi-fi:

When I'm around, she's playing with me and that's when she starts with the big stagings. If we're dancing, we have to have different names. And I have to talk about her dancing as "Helen's," Helen our neighbor. And I'll have to say how Helen is dancing, describe her moves. So she stages a lot, and I'll say whatever she wants me to say, going along....

Whether consciously encouraged by parents or unconsciously simply a fact of family life, verbal interaction was valued in these families. Eric's mother used the apt phrase "rap tight" to describe this quality:

He asks very smart questions and they (his grandparents) answer him, on his level, but not talking down to him or ignoring him, "You'll learn later on," or "I'm busy." You know, they take time, so we're very lucky in that sense, the family is really rap tight!

²⁷The other parents who were similarly involved included: 1) Ann's mother who herself wondered whether she had not gone overboard and "structured her play too much" after having "spent days" with her talking about and making costumes for one of Ann's favorite stories; 2) Carolyn's father who regularly went "pretend shopping" with her and who, Carolyn's mother felt, might have prolonged the reign of her imaginary companion because he is so enthusiastic always in questioning her about "Frances;" 3) Susan's father who regularly spent Saturday mornings playing imaginary grocery store with her.

Because talking was such an important mode of being together, it is hardly surprising that these children became very adept at using talk as a way of capturing and holding their parents' attention and of fending off its loss. Talking about their imaginary companions is a case in point. As Nicole's mother commented:

Whenever my husband and I would have a conversation at the dinner table which was not including Nicole (...) she'd say, "Well, Gwendolyn at her work...such and such," and she'd get back into the conversation. Heaven forbid you should have a conversation that excluded her! It was her way of getting back into the conversation.

Matthew's mother referred to his stories about Andrew as "filibustering" which worked because "once he noticed that he still had our attention it would go on farther (until it) really was an act of love still to be listening to him." Randy's complaints about Kal-kit and Dumindumin "bothering me so I can't go to sleep" kept his parents coming back to his bedroom over and over again each night. Ann kept her mother from making the initial separation at nursery school for months "by being more interested in talking to me" than in getting involved in play. Demian's persistent popping out of bed to ask questions and Adam's nightly attempts to "string you along by talking" are examples which have been cited before. A most insightful description of a child's use of talking in this fashion--and of her own susceptibility to such verbal seduction!--was given by Carolyn's mother:

Oh it happens (that she asks for stories) when we're walking someplace, when I'm making breakfast and I can't even think about anything without making coffee! It's like the Frances thing (Carolyn's imaginary companion), she's asking for interaction, verbal interaction, and I really....I refuse it quite often! I tell

her I want to talk to her, not tell stories...What she does is she asks me how things work, 'cause she knows I'll fall for that every time! I noticed that once a year or so ago, how she could--she started asking me questions about how things were manufactured because she knew that would make me talk! (...) I do talk to her quite a bit, but sometimes I don't want to, so she uses things, you know, we all do, I think, to cause the interaction.

The Children's Verbal Facility and Sensitivity to Sound

To what extent verbal and other sound-filled interactions became important in these families because the children--rather than their parents--were innately so inclined is obviously a question which should be considered but which is hard to answer. Children who by virtue of their constitutional endowment seem exceptionally responsive to sounds or unusually quick to pick up language undoubtedly draw even-ordinarily-verbal parents into more-than-usual amounts of talking. There is no question that the overwhelming majority of these children emerge as having been verbally precocious, even when some allowances are made for parental exaggeration. How much of this precocity is to be explained by constitutional endowment? Again, this is not a question which can be answered easily. In hopes of learning more along these lines, a question was included in the interview about these children's early sensitivities. It was worded as follows: "Sometimes babies are particularly sensitive to or responsive to certain kinds of stimuli: to lights, sounds, textures, changes of temperature, etc. Would you say your child was like that or not?" It was asked of 13 mothers. Six replied yes, to sounds; other stimuli were not mentioned except for texture and sunlight, each by one parent. Randy's mother was the only one of

the six to describe an adverse sensitivity to sounds:

He was, he was! (In what kinds of ways?) Loud noises... not even loud noises, sometimes something that you or I would take for granted as a noise would frighten him and make him cry. Like my husband sneezed once loudly, and he got hysterical, you know, this is as an infant. I could not run the vacuum when he was awake, which I thought was strange, because when I brought him home from the hospital I wanted to get him used to the sound and I did. But once he became a little more aware, he wasn't having any of it, it frightened him! So I stopped it. And the blender-- he still doesn't like the sound of the blender!

The other five parents said their children has "always liked" and been "very responsive" to sound, one to "talking" and four to music. While these sensitivities may indeed have been inborn, it is worth noting that each of the five children so described was also, by his mother's admission, surrounded from infancy by the very kinds of sound to which she described him as being so responsive: Matthew by his mother's voice talking or reading aloud,²⁸ Melissa and Ari by their mothers' singing, and Leslie and Nicole by music on the radio, TV, or their parents' recordings. If not "created" by their parents, these children's sensitivities to sounds were certainly fostered by them.

The Role of Music

Although no questions were asked about music unless mothers themselves mentioned it in some way, it came up in at least half the interviews. To find that it played a role in the lives of some of these children was especially pleasing since it was so consistent with the hypothesized importance of sounds. Melissa, Ari, John, and Shira

²⁸See p. 85.

all had mothers who sang to them from infancy on. Melissa's mother conveyed very clearly how significant that experience had been for her:

I used to sing Rockabye Baby to her and...I have a record for her of nursery rhymes, and whenever Rockabye Baby came on she would cry and she'd go, "Hold me! Hold me!" It was a real emotional experience for her. So whenever it came on I would have to do it, and from that time I guess I sort of had the sense that she really responds to musical things that are very tender like that. (...) She loves music, she's always been very...um...she used to hum with me from when she was very young, I know I can't remember...maybe 5 months?

John's mother had sung him to sleep as a baby and she now relied on him to sing his younger brother to sleep. John and Ari began music lessons at 3. Ari, by his mother's account, was exceptionally musical even earlier than that. He had been given a guitar for his second birthday which had become "his best friend," the equivalent of a transitional object according to his mother. Between 2 and 3 he learned by heart all the lyrics to his parents' records of the Weavers, Pete Seeger, Bob Dylan, and the Beatles. He also began "composing" at that age and his attempts to play his guitar and a harmonica simultaneously led his parents to get him a harmonica holder. "And," as his mother said,

...he would spend hours, really literally hours, pacing-- when he listens to music he paces, he walks in circles. He always has since the very beginning, since he was 2, since his very first record. He walks in circles in this deep concentration.

In some families it was simply taken for granted that music was part of the background for living. Leslie's father said their hi-fi was "constantly on" (it was during the interview until I asked if it could be turned off so as not to interfere with the tape recorder),

and he said of her, "She loves music! As soon as she hears a record or something she's out dancing or singing." Nicole's mother described her very similarly:

She loved music...and still does. I mean she can sing all day, and dance. She loves to watch people dance...like on Channel 13 to watch the ballet and get up and try it. She loves music and any kind of song where you can put her name in it, she loves. Like M-I-C, K-E-Y, M-O-U-S-E, we changed to "N-I-C, O-L-E, I love you and you love me," and just loves that! (When did you first know that about her?) Oh, when she was an infant she, you know...I...from...Oh God, that's really hard. I mean as long as I can remember she's always responded to music. (Was there much music around?) Oh yes! All the time! We always, we always had, I mean from before she was born we always had music on.

Demian's mother also described a household in which music was a regular feature:

They (her 3 children) sing around the house. I think a lot of it is just hearing music all your life. There are people I know who just never, you know, listen to the radio. They don't play records--they have them and they play them at parties, but they don't play them. And they just don't tend to be as musical. (...) They (the children) all sing on key, or almost on key, which is something. I think that's probably just growing up with it. I think anybody would if they heard it enough. (How much do they hear it?) Well, when the record player wasn't broken, we'd play records at least half the time we're home. Or we play the radio. But Demian has already broken the record player twice. The first time was when he was a baby and I guess he wanted to hear it...

In four families parents were themselves producers of music.

Demian's father was by avocation a musician and songwriter who hoped someday to support his family through his music. I learned this almost accidentally, after Demian's mother handed me a strong cup of coffee and joked:

You'll stay up all night and sing! That's what my husband does all the time, he stays up all night and sings and plays the guitar!

Melissa's father was a guitar player too; according to her mother, "even when he's interacting with her, he's there strumming his guitar." Shira's mother described her husband and her children as very musical but went on to talk about a fascinating habit of her own:

Yeah, we do a lot of singing...I guess when there was nothing to do, you know, I sing. I tend to sing while I'm eating meals, I did that as a kid, you know, I tend to sing while I'm eating if I'm eating alone. So now they both (Shira and her brother) sing while they're eating, alone or not. They hum a lot, sing in between bites. (Do you think that you did that when she was little?) Probably, probably...because...I wasn't aware of the fact that I did it as a child until she was about a year and a half old, when my mother and Alan (her husband) cracked up in my presence because I was doing it. I just never even heard myself doing it! I've always done it so they do it too now....

I believe Shira's mother's habit is another instance of the same phenomenon at work in the imaginary companion, namely the use of sounds "to keep oneself company," especially at times when one is alone. Ari's mother gave a very revealing account of the way in which music came to play a similar role in her childhood. After hearing at length of Ari's musical ability, I had asked if she was musical, and she replied:

Nothing, no, no....Well, I have to say, when I say "Nothing" it isn't quite true. When I was a child my father was a professional musician. My sister and I were alone a lot. We had a big piano and she was a very fine pianist from the age of 5. She was a musician--she and he were the musicians, my mother and I were....awful! But, when we were alone, we'd spend our time at the piano singing. And so from a very young age, we knew a lot of unusual songs, because my father had played the borscht belt putting himself through school and everything, and he had reams of sheet music, dating from the teens. And so we got to know them. And we really loved mu--I mean when I was 6 we would sing "Oh Promise Me," you know, really funny stuff! And--even after we grew up and she was married

and she had a child, when we lived near each other, whenever we got together it was around the piano. And now, even after Ari was born, when we go up there--because she has a piano and I don't we go up there--our happiest moments are, some of our happiest moments are...we...we play and sing long into the night, just the two of us. We break out all the songs we can think of....So I think that that frustration in me, you know...I mean I couldn't sing to Ahmed! I have a terrible voice! But here I had this helpless infant (laughs) and I nursed for a long time. I'd sit at the window in his room and I'd nurse and I'd sing to him. And those are really the first songs that he learned, the songs that I sang to him. And he sings them to this day....

Ari's mother's story not only reveals how music became linked both with intimacy and with times of being alone, it illustrates beautifully the ways in which succeeding generations recreate when they are alone the experiences of intimacy they have enjoyed with those who have gone before. In singing their father's songs when they were alone as children, Ari's mother and her sister recreated in sound a key part of the experience of his presence. Singing to Ari when alone with him as an infant, she both evoked old intimacies and "created" new ones, "wrapped" in the same sounds. In singing to himself at bedtime Ari then uses the sounds of his mother's presence to help himself to fall asleep in her absence. As he grew, his increasing ability to function independently was described by his mother in a very telling figure of speech when she said, "he really is able to make his own music an awful lot of the time."

The Use of Sounds to "Keep Oneself Company": Are Children with Imaginary Companions Identifying With Parents?

Although Ari's mother was the only parent to give such a telling account of the way in which sounds (whether of music or of talking)

became associated in her life both with intimacy and with being alone, I believe that the same relationships hold for most parents whose children develop imaginary companions. I suspect that these children, in creating and interacting with their companions, are not only re-experiencing in sound a key aspect of what characterizes intimacy with their parents, but are also emulating parents who themselves associate closeness with sounds and who defend against its loss by turning to words, sounds, or song when they are alone. When Eric's mother spoke of her feelings about his transitional object, the only one of his stuffed animals "that had music to it," her imagery hinted at this association between closeness and sounds:

It was lovely, yeah...his little person to love. That's all, it was nice! The rest of us at night can sit in here and talk or kiss (my italics) you know...but he could pretend.....and he comforted himself with it. It was fine!

Shira's mother's singing while eating alone and Demian's father's habitual sitting up at night to play his guitar and sing are instances of parents turning to sounds when they are alone. Nicole's and Matthew's mothers told me that as children they had had imaginary companions of their own, thus the same relationships could presumably be considered to apply to them.

While in most interviews I felt that it would have been intrusive and inappropriate to ask mothers what they did when they were alone or feeling lonely, I did so in one instance where it felt comfortable. Melissa's mother's description of using the telephone when she was alone provided another example of a parent turning to sound:

I guess the way my life is structured now I don't have a tremendous amount of time to be by myself, so I don't experience it as lonely any more. You know, it seems nice when I have time, when she's off taking a nap, and I have time for myself finally and I can do things for me or the house or my reading or whatever.....I'm certainly not saying I don't have time to feel lonely, even when I'm with her! There are times when I just--I really need an adult to talk to or something! I might call somebody up on the phone. The phone gets used a lot! Less now, a lot more when she was younger when she slept for longer periods and I had more time on my hands. And not being used to that... because I had always worked, I would call people...which is my way of dealing with it, more than doing things on my own.

Talking to oneself while alone, whether aloud or silently in a kind of ongoing internal conversation seems to me a related phenomenon which was characteristic of some of these parents. Leslie's father, for instance, after the interview proper when we were talking about my interest in the verbal aspects of children who have imaginary friends, happened to refer to his own habit of "talking out loud to myself" as a kind of "therapy."²⁹ In typing transcripts of their interviews I was struck by the degree to which some of these parents seemed to think in dialogue, i.e., telling anecdotes, describing things, events, their children less in narrating action than in recapitulating conversation. Some of these parents quoted themselves and their children as many as 40, 50 and 60 times in the course of a 12 to 15 page interview.³⁰ Such subtle characteristics cannot, obviously, be reliably

²⁹The mother of the one child who was not included in the study because her mother failed to understand that it was she, rather than her child, whom I wished to interview (see p.50), did tell me when we spoke briefly about my research that she always talked to herself when she was alone in the house.

³⁰For instance, Melissa's mother quoted Melissa 69 times and herself 45; Nicole's mother quoted her 59 times and herself 40; Alden's mother quoted him 44 times and herself 38. (In counting, I considered each pair of quotation marks, regardless of the number of words or sentences enclosed, as one unit.)

interpreted as evidence of a particularly verbal, sound-filled defensive style, but they do suggest a certain fondness for the spoken word!

Whether it can be demonstrated that parents of children with imaginary companions as a group, however, do turn to sound-filled activities to "keep themselves company" when they are alone remains a question for further research.

Other Aspects of the Imaginary Companion Phenomenon

At the outset of the study questions were raised about three aspects of the imaginary companion phenomenon in addition to those with which the hypotheses were concerned. It was hoped that the interviews would yield information about transitional object usage, about the various configurations of companion-to-child and child-to-parent role relationships, and about the degree to which there would be evidence that a "narcissistic blow" of some kind had precipitated the creation of each imaginary companion. Each of these topics is discussed below.

The Relationship of the Imaginary Companion and Transitional Object Phenomena: No evidence emerged from the interviews to suggest that the development of an imaginary companion is systematically related either to the presence or to the absence of a transitional object. Ten of sixteen mothers described their children with the imaginary friends as having had transitional objects--3 had blankets, 5 had stuffed animals or dolls, and 1 his guitar. Two children among the 10 (Melissa and Randy) had had a series of 2 or 3 objects which had become important at different points. All the transitional objects had developed prior to the children's imaginary companions³¹ and in most cases had con-

³¹Rachel developed a strong attachment to a Teddy bear after the period in which her imaginary companion had been important. Since this was not until she was almost 6, I did not consider it a transitional object in the usual sense.

tinued to be important--though in different situations--throughout the imaginary companions' ascendancies.³² Transitional objects were used by these children in the usual ways, mainly at bedtime, but occasionally as comforters under other upsetting circumstances.

Most parents saw their children's imaginary companions as unrelated to and independent of their transitional objects and they described the two as turning up in quite different situations. Transitional objects, for instance, were rarely used in dramatic play or personified as the companions were. There were two exceptions, however: Adam's and Melissa's imaginary friends and transitional objects had some interchangeability of function. Adam's companion Satsamatzen first appeared on the occasion of his first haircut, an upsetting situation when, as his mother noted, his transitional object, a stuffed Rabbit named Rabby, "wasn't there." Adam described Satzamatzen as a little boy but said that his mother was a rabbit, certainly a suggestive genealogy. Adam sometimes asked for food for Satzamatzen and/or Rabby and--unlike many children with imaginary companions who do the

³²Demian was the only child in the group whose mother described the shifts in his attachment to his transitional object in relation to the vicissitudes of his imaginary companion. Demian was strongly attached to a blanket which very much receded in importance when "George" emerged. When George quite suddenly disappeared 6 to 7 months later, the blanket again became important. Demian was the only child in the group whose imaginary companion disappeared all of a sudden. According to his mother this happened when she pointed out "the real George" one day on the playground. The "real George" was a boy who had formerly been in Demian's playgroup whom he had not seen in 6 months and who, his mother supposed, was the source of the imaginary friend. George's sudden disappearance after an adult's interference granting him reality status is reminiscent of the disappearance of Lynn's "Nosey" (Benson & Pryor, 1973) discussed earlier in this paper. Interestingly, Lynn's transitional object also regained importance after the sudden and untimely disappearance of her imaginary companion.

reverse--he would sometimes blame misdeeds on his transitional object (or throw Rabby at his mother) but never on his imaginary companion. Despite such interchangeable appearances and overlapping functions, Adam's mother saw the two phenomena as distinctly separate:

Satzamatzen is a companion. And Rabby....is a lovey. And there's quite a difference in my mind. For example, Satzamatzen doesn't have to be there for Adam to go to sleep. Satzamatzen comes and goes. Rabby is always around. Now there are times when Satzamatzen appears at the dining room table, when he is not around. They're not usually there together. In fact, almost....I can't remember a circumstance when they were....

The other child whose imaginary companion and transitional object sometimes served in similar circumstances was Melissa. She would pretend to put Tiny Baby, an imaginary companion, on the back of her tricycle and then comfort her when she fell off, and she sometimes did the same thing with Clara her bear. She never used either as scapegoats, and there were no other situations in which her mother described the two as equally likely to turn up.

As for the six children who had never had transitional objects (Ann, Nicole, Rachel, John, and Leslie), there were no obvious ways in which they appeared different from the children who had. Rachel's mother saw her imaginary companion as taking the place of a transitional object:

She never had attached herself to any....animal, or blanket... nothing. You know, this (her imaginary companion, JayJay) was the first thing that was what I would a....an attachment that she had, a security blanket, you know?

None of the other mothers suggested such a connection, nor did they express particular feelings about the absence of an attachment to a transitional object in their children.

Configurations of Companion-to-Child and Child-to-Parent Roles:

While I had a number of questions about this aspect of the imaginary companion phenomenon, one of its most fascinating, I think, the interview data proved to be more tantalizing than helpful in providing answers. I had wondered whether the ways children used their imaginary companions would vary widely or hardly at all within the group. Would children who parented their imaginary companions be distinguishable from those who were parented by them? Would children who used their companions as scapegoats also treat them in solicitous and loving ways? Would different patterns of imaginary companion usage turn out to be related to any other differences among the children? How were children's patterns of interaction with their imaginary companions related to their patterns of interaction with their parents?

The interviews did not provide the kind of data which could do more than hint at the answers to most of these questions. Given that children's ways of using their imaginary companions were not observed but described by parents whose descriptions were shaped by their own memories and concerns, the information about them was neither "objective" nor complete. Even when parents were asked to talk about their handling of certain parental functions, their answers were not reliable accounts of what they actually do. Thus, the data about patterns of imaginary companion usage and about patterns of parenting were subject to limitations. Despite these, differences did emerge in the ways mothers answered questions about how their children used their imaginary companions.

First, it was more usual in this group for children to parent their companions than to be parented by them. Every child but one was described as sometimes taking a form of parental role toward his or her imaginary friend (e.g., "taking care of," "teaching," "scolding," "worrying about"), but only four children were described as having imaginary companions who took care of them.³³ For three of the four this was occasional, as they also reversed roles and parented their imaginary companions. Nicole was the only child in the group who never apparently took on the role of parent with regard to her imaginary companion Gwendolyn: Gwendolyn was, according to Nicole's mother, "always the good mother" and she never was treated as a younger, more vulnerable or childlike figure by Nicole. It is interesting to compare this group of normal children with the 14 non-psychotic but emotionally disturbed hospitalized children whom Bender and Vogel (1941) described. While their descriptions are brief and obviously not systematic, it is noteworthy that only one of the 14 children is mentioned as taking a caretaking, parenting role with respect to her imaginary companion. (Most of the imaginary companions Bender and Vogel describe fall into the roles of scapegoat, of projected "bad self" or wished-for ego ideal, or of good friend and playmate.) The comparison sug-

³³The four children were Rachel, Nicole, Leslie, and Tara. Rachel's and Nicole's imaginary companions cared for them when their real mothers could not or would not: JayJay supposedly walked Rachel to a dangerous corner when her mother was unavailable, Gwendolyn bought presents for and read stories to Nicole when her mother would not. Leslie's Sharon, in contrast, often helped her when her mother was available and offering her help, e.g., when putting on her coat and mittens (possibly at times when Leslie wanted to be independent without hurting her mother's feelings?). Tara's mother did not specify how Dimlin "took care of" her.

gests that parenting one's imaginary companion may depend on having first received "good enough" parenting from one's own parents, something which Bender and Vogel's children lacked but which these children presumably all received.³⁴

Secondly, there were some interesting differences between the children who used their imaginary companions as scapegoats and those who did not. Eight children in the group sometimes blamed their companions for their own misdeeds; nine children never used them in this way. Among the "blamers" there were only 3 children (38%) whose mothers also said they "took care of" their imaginary companions in what might be considered positive ways (e.g., "comforting," "holding," "teaching," "mothering," "looking out for their needs" as opposed to scolding or punishing), while among the "non-blamers" all 9 children (100%) were described as also being positive caretakers. 63% of the "blamers" scolded or "punished" their imaginary companions while only 22% of the "non-blamers" did. 50% of the "blamers" "worried about their companions doing things that are naughty," while only one of the "non-blamers" (11%) did.

Given the above, I was interested whether the disciplinary practices used by parents of "blamers" differed from those of "non-blamers", at least insofar as they were described in the interviews. The two groups could not be differentiated on the basis of whether mothers

³⁴Similarly, none of the imaginary companions of the 6 patients discussed by Myers (1976) were parented by them. All 6 women were relatively disturbed and had suffered unusually stressful childhoods.

admitted using physical punishment as the 4 children whose parents said they sometimes "hit" were equally divided between the two groups. There did seem to be a preponderance of the parents who emphasized explanation, reasoning, and talk as conscious disciplinary methods among the parents of the "non-blamers:" 5 such parents among the "non-blamers" vs. only 2 among the "blamers."

No child in the group had an imaginary companion who blamed, scolded, or punished him or her. No imaginary companions fought with or hurt their child creators. Leslie's "Brother" sometimes was said to have "pinched her but he didn't mean to" and Randy's four companions would occasionally "not listen" and "bother" him at bedtime, but these were the only negative, victimizing-of-the-child interactions described. The scarcity of such interactions reflects, I believe, the psychological health of this group of children, as instances of fighting, punishing, and persecution between child and imaginary companion are reported more frequently among disturbed children with imaginary companions (cf. again Bender & Vogel, 1941, and also, Swett, 1910).

One other interesting, though possibly coincidental, relationship merits comment as far as there being any connection between the child's relationship to his parents and to his imaginary companion is concerned. There were only 3 mothers who responded "yes" when asked if their children ever expressly excluded them from situations in which the imaginary companion was "present." (Several of the other mothers were quite surprised by this question, as if the idea

of excluding them would simply not occur to their children.) Interestingly, the same 3 mothers were the only ones whose children's imaginary companions were specifically named as family members: Leslie's companions included "Brother" and a husband named "Hosta"; Ari had a wife named "Moey" and several children; and Alden had a number of individuals whom he referred to as "my children." This coincidence led me to wonder whether these 3 mothers might not be overly close to their children, hence the children's need to exclude their mothers at times and to create imaginary family members with whom issues of distance and closeness within the family were under the child's control. The interviews suggest that these 3 mothers were extremely close to their children and that, perhaps more than other mothers in the group, they relied on these children to be their own confidantes and companions. Leslie's mother quoted herself as saying to Leslie when she wanted to play by herself with the door closed, "Well, Leslie, come outside and Keep Mommy company..." Alden's mother referred frequently to what good company he was for her and her accounts of conversing with him prior to the birth of his younger brother provide evidence of how freely she confided her own inner life in him. Ari's mother even expressed concern that she had been excessively close to him:

I feel that I overstimulated him. I would never do that again, but we spent a lot of time together and I had been a rather neglected infant, and so I think I overcompensated. And I think that we have fallen into a 4 year pit because here we are and he's 4 and he expects to be entertained a lot--no, expects us to listen while he entertains is what it is. And that could have something to

do with the beginning because we played an awful lot. (.....) He will say things--not a lot, but occasionally he'll say something to me like, "Don't look at me! Just don't look at me! And it really disturbs me because I start thinking, "Does he think that all we do is look at him?"

"Narcissistic Blows" as Precipitating Events in the Creation of an Imaginary Companion: Few mothers spontaneously interpreted their children's creation of an imaginary companion as the specific response to some form of distress. Many understood the companions, once they were established, as having an array of functions related to the preservation of the child's self-esteem,³⁵ but there were only two mothers who spoke of the imaginary friend's initial appearance as happening at a time when they recognized their child as being narcissistically vulnerable. Adam's Satzamatzen appeared first at his first haircut when his mother knew that he was upset and distressed not to have his transitional object, Rabby. Matthew's Andrew emerged in a "time of insecurity," according to his mother--he could not ski as well as a desperately admired older brother, and he had just started speech therapy--and his purpose was clearly to bolster Matthew's confidence and morale. Several mothers mentioned events which might have been upsetting as occurring right

³⁵Ann's, Nicole's, Ari's, and Leslie's mothers were aware that the companions turned up when their children were naughty and suddenly exposed to parental censure. Alden's, Matthew's, and Demina's mothers knew that theirs were likely to appear whenever they felt insecure in relation to peers and/or older siblings. Adam's, Eric's, and Melissa's mothers noticed that their imaginary companions were often around when they themselves were otherwise involved and unavailable to their children.

around the time of the companion's emergence,³⁶ while commenting that their children had "seemed fine" or "had no problems," implying if not saying directly that the emergency of the imaginary friend, therefore, was not related. In general, unless the child appeared upset when his imaginary friends were around or turned to them when his parents thought he had cause to be upset, most mothers perceived the imaginary companion's existence and any concurrent stressful events as independent and unrelated phenomena.

Although parents themselves did not see the imaginary companion's creation as precipitated by narcissistic distress, in at least two thirds of the interviews there is sufficient evidence to make such an interpretation at least a plausible one. The sources of distress varied from child to child. The youngest ones seemed to be reacting to more or less commonplace, inevitable lapses or diminutions of maternal attention or approval. Sometimes their imaginary companions' names hinted at such origins. Eric's "Bissy," for instance, appeared, according to his mother, "whenever I was bush (she pronounced it "bissy") around the house." Melissa, at 2, was apparently wounded to the quick whenever her mother admired another baby, even though reassured, "You're my baby, I was just looking at that tiny baby....," but her distress vanished after the creation of her own imaginary "Tiny Baby." The loss of familiar surroundings and routines rather than the diminished presence of

³⁶For instance, the arrival of a new sibling (Ann, Alden, Shira); being suddenly removed from a familiar playgroup (Demian); moving to a new, unfinished apartment and into one's own room for the first time (Nicole, Susan); mother returning to work (Rachel); father's job schedule suddenly unpredictable and hectic (Leslie).

mother per se may have precipitated other imaginary companions' appearances. Susan's mother did not recall her being at all upset upon moving to a new apartment and into her own room for the first time. She did recall that Susan's "Flora" first appeared at that time and that Susan had been terribly upset by the page in one of the Babar stories where Flora, displaced from her baby carriage, falls out and into a tree. The oldest children at the time of their companions' emergence seemed, not surprisingly, to be coping less with distress at the loss of maternal attention than with painful realizations of their own limitations or vulnerabilities with respect to admired grown-ups or peers. In none of these families did children seem to be coping with unusual stress; the kinds of "narcissistic blow" with which they were coping all seemed to me to fall within the range of what would be normally expectable in early childhood.

Why certain children react to such narcissistic blow by creating imaginary companions when others of equally verbal parents--their own siblings, for instance--do not remains an important question to be studied. While it has been my contention that sound-filled early experiences are a key factor in the background of children who create imaginary friends, they are clearly not the only factor. Some experience of feeling alone and narcissistically vulnerable which gives rise to the need for an imaginary companion seems to me equally important. Some children may be more susceptible to such experiences, perhaps by virtue of temperament, perhaps because they have enjoyed such close relationships to parents that

they are particularly sensitive to suddenly feeling alone. Further research is necessary to reach a better understanding of the factors involved.

Limitations of the Study and Indications for Further Research

While I believe the results of this study support the notion that sound-filled early experiences were a significant feature in the backgrounds of these children with imaginary companions, the study had a number of limitations which must be taken into account in assessing the general applicability of its findings. To begin with, it involved a small sample of only 18 mothers. Secondly, most of them were well-educated and of middle or upper middle class background, thus by virtue of their origins already likely to be an articulate group of "talking caretakers." Third, as volunteers in an interview study they further identified themselves as individuals willing to, and in all likelihood fond of, talk. In a further study it would be useful to eliminate a possible volunteer effect, perhaps by selecting parents of children with imaginary companions only after interviewing all parents in a given school population and to use a population of lower socio-economic status. If lower class, less well-educated mothers of children with imaginary companions were also found to be especially talkative caretakers, this finding would carry more weight.

A study comparing the mothering of children who have imaginary companions with that of their peers who do not is also indicated at this point. Children with imaginary companions could be matched with controls who do not have imaginary friends but who are regarded

as equally intelligent and/or creative (by teachers' ratings, perhaps) and their respective mothers compared on a number of the same dimensions at issue in the present study, e.g., mothers' memories of their children's early language development, their handling of bedtime and of reading aloud, their degree of involvement in their children's dramatic play, their own talkativeness. These two groups of mothers might also be observed interacting directly with their respective children. It would be interesting to see in a situation involving mother and child in a sequence of dramatic play, in learning a new task together, or in negotiating a period of separation, for example, whether mothers of children with imaginary companions would engage them in more verbal interaction or themselves do more talking than would mothers of non-imaginary companion children.

Further research is also needed to identify and differentiate other factors involved in a child's creation of an imaginary companion. While I have argued that a close, sound-filled mother-child relationship is a key feature, a sine qua non, in the background of the child who develops an imaginary friend, it is clearly not the only factor involved. Just because a child has enjoyed such sound-filled parenting and developed the verbal capacity to invent an imaginary companion does not mean s/he will experience the need for one. Not all children encounter the narcissistic blows which lead some to invent imaginary companions; not all feel the impact of the same blows to the same degree or in the same way. Just as there are many healthy children with "good-enough" mothers and presumably normal tactile sensitivities who never develop an attachment to a transi-

tional object, so there are undoubtedly many articulate children with very verbal parents who never invent imaginary companions. The siblings of children with imaginary friends are a case in point: many of them have presumably received very similar if not identical parental handling, yet they never invent imaginary companions. What accounts for the difference? As stated before I believe the kind of narcissistic blow a child encounters may be an important factor, but so too is his/her sensitivity to whatever blows befall. How would parents perceive the differences between the child with imaginary companion and their other offspring? Would they characterize the child with the imaginary companion as more verbal than the others? Would their relationships to him/her emerge as more "sound-filled" than their relationships with the siblings? Would s/he be described as more sensitive, as closer to the parents, as having encountered more distressing circumstances than his/her siblings? A study comparing children who have imaginary companions with siblings who do not would afford an excellent opportunity to determine what factors are involved.

VII. Summary

In the preceding chapters it was proposed that the imaginary companion be looked at as a form of auditory transitional object developed by children whose early, close-to-mother experiences have been filled to a rich and perhaps unusual degree with the sounds of their mothers' voices. The notion was that it is the talking with, to, or about an imaginary companion which is one of the phenomenon's "essential properties" (Winnicott, 1953), and that the reason why the experience of talking-and-hearing-oneself-talk comforts and reassures the child, especially in moments of narcissistic vulnerability, is that it evokes, auditorily, the experience of mother's presence and all the feelings of well-being that connotes.

Mothers of children with imaginary companions were interviewed about their children's companions and about their handling of the children in an effort to see whether evidence would emerge that they are the "talking caretakers" so hypothesized. Seven specific hypotheses about how mothers would behave and what they would say in the interviews were outlined. While not all of these were well supported, the interviews generally revealed that the parents of these children with imaginary companions were, indeed, verbal people who enjoyed talking, telling stories, reading, and often singing to them and that most of them had done these things from the time their children were infants. They appeared highly invested in these children's verbal development as well: they logged their growing vocabularies, tape recorded their first speech and early songs, and generally noticed and remembered with special pleasure many of

the things their children said. The children, for their part, emerged as unusually precocious and highly articulate in their language development. Music emerged as playing a significant role in about half the families as well. All in all, there was appreciable evidence that these children's early lives had unfolded in families where experiences of intimacy were richly accompanied by the sounds of voices. The limitations of the study--its small sample of mainly middle and upper middle class mothers who by virtue of origin were likely to be verbal people and the possibility of a "volunteer effect"--were discussed along with indications for further research.

Appendix I

Dear Parents,

The director of your child's school has kindly given me permission to send this letter home with your child. I am a former teacher, now a child psychologist in the process of writing my doctoral dissertation at City University, and I would like to ask your help. I am studying fantasy development in young children and am interested in finding boys and girls who have invented imaginary "friends" or companions. By an imaginary companion I mean an invisible, make-believe person, animal, or creature of some kind whom the child may talk about or play with in a variety of ways.

If you have a young child who now has or used to have an imaginary companion and if you would be willing to talk with me about it, I would be very grateful for your help. Similarly, if you know any other children who have imaginary companions I would be grateful if you could put me in touch with their parents. If you call me or leave a message for me to contact you, I will gladly answer any questions you may have. My telephone number is (212) 475-0449.

Thank you very much for your help.

Sincerely,

Barbara Thacher

Appendix II

Parent Interview

I. Questions about the Imaginary Companion (IC).

I have some specific questions I would like to ask but before that, it will be most helpful to me if you would just tell me about your child's IC(s) in whatever way occurs to you.

First part of interview proceeds with interviewer (I) following up anything unclear but otherwise not directing the flow. I then proceeds, omitting anything which has already been answered.

Does the IC have an age? sex? notable appearance? special characteristics?

Do you have any thoughts about where the IC's name comes from?

How did it start?

Has it (they) changed since that time?

(If there is more than 1 IC): How much are the different IC's distinct? Do they turn up separately or together? Is one more popular?

How often would you say the IC appears?

How real would you say it is to your child?

(If IC has disappeared): When did the IC disappear? How did that occur?

Different children use their IC's in a variety of ways. I've made a list of all the ones I've come across and I'd like to go over it with you and ask which of these your child does. Some, you will have already told me.

Does he take care of the IC?

Does he teach the IC things?

Does he scold or punish the IC?

Does he "worry" about the IC doing things which are dangerous?

Does he "worry" about the IC doing things which are naughty?

Does he blame the IC for his own misdeeds?

Does he say the IC "made him" or "told him to do it" when he gets into trouble?

Does he consult the IC before he'll obey you?

Does he talk admiringly of the IC being able to do or have things which he can't--either because he's too small or they're not permitted?

Does he talk about the IC as less capable and/or more of a baby than he?

Does he talk about the IC (or the IC's parents) in ways which you recognize as being "much better", "much worse" or "just like" you and/or your husband?

Does the IC take care of him?

Does the IC teach him things?

Does the IC scold or punish him?

Does the IC "worry about" or tell him not to do things which would be dangerous or naughty?

Does the IC blame him for things?

Does the IC ever fight with or hurt him?

Does he ask for things for the IC which are really for him?

Does he ask or insist that you do things for the IC, e.g., take it places, tell it things, etc.?

Does he ever expressly exclude you from something he is doing with the IC?

Does the IC ever do things to or for you?

Does the IC ever take up "real" space, e.g., at the table, in the car, etc.?

In what situations does the IC turn up usually?

At meals?

At school?

At bedtime?

Outside?

In the car?

In play with other children?

At bathtime?

With adults other than family?

In solitary play?

Other?

You told me before how it started. How old was your child at that time? What was that time like for him?

What do you think the IC's function is (or was) for your child?

How do (did) you feel about it?

Thank you for all you've told me about your child's IC. I'm also interested in knowing what the children who invent IC's are like. Would it be all right if I asked you some questions about _____ too?

(If yes, I proceeds to part II)

II. Questions About the Child

What is a typical day like for your child?

What was s/he like as a baby?

Sometimes babies are particularly sensitive to or responsive to certain kinds of stimuli--to sounds, to light, changes of temperature, and so forth. Would you say that your child was sensitive in any of these ways?

What is bedtime like for your child?

Sometimes children become very attached to a special blanket or toy. Does your child have something like that? (If yes, ask about whatever is not volunteered spontaneously.)

What is it?

When did it become important?

How does s/he use it? (If no longer used, ask about its end.)

How important is it to your child? (Does it travel outside the home with him/her? What happens if it is not available?)

Is it ever used together with the IC or are they "separate"?

How do you feel about it?

Do you read or tell stories to your child? (If yes): How much?

How old would you say s/he was when you began?

Does your child watch TV? (If yes): How much? How old was s/he when s/he began?

How have you handled separations from you?

How have you handled setting limits or discipline with your child? (If parent answers without specifying actual disciplinary

methods): How would you say that your child has come to know
what is permitted and what is not?

Who has taken care of him/her mostly since s/he was born?

What would you say you enjoy most about him/her?

Thank you very much!

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