An investigation into parents' attitudes to their children having imaginary companions

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I hereby declare that, except where explicit attribution is made, the work presented in this thesis is my own.

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Abstract

Imaginary companions (ICs) are a relatively common feature of childhood, yet the views of parents regarding their children's creation of and engagement with ICs are relatively unexplored. This study explored the attitudes of parents towards ICs and the factors that relate to variation in views.

The study comprised of two phases. Phase 1 examined the views of mothers and fathers of primary school aged children using a self-completion questionnaire. 228 mothers and 31 fathers participated. Of these 259 parents, 63 had a child with a current or previous IC and 196 had a child without an IC. Phase 2 further examined the views of 12 mothers who had all experienced the phenomenon with their children, using semi-structured interviews.

Results indicated that in general, parents held mainly positive or neutral views of ICs. They perceived there to be both advantages and disadvantages for their child, they had some concerns, and would be most inclined to ignore the behaviour. Context was found to also relate to the views of parents, and they would be more inclined to join in with the pretense in private than in public. Experience of ICs was associated with the views of parents, and parents with experience of ICs consistently reported more positive views for all attitudes measured. Child age was also found to impact on the views of parents, who were all less accepting of their children's ICs with increasing child age. It was hypothesised that parents' views may therefore play a part in older children keeping their ICs a secret from others. Furthermore, religious affiliation was also found to result in some variation in parent views.

Mothers interviewed all expressed positive views of their children's IC, identifying a number of developmental benefits afforded to the child and indentifying their experience to have been positive, thus positively shaping their views of ICs. Their positive views were however found to be conditional upon a number of factors, including the age of the child, the IC being used appropriately, and there being no negative social impact. Whilst the mothers had few concerns for young children with ICs, their concern was found to grow with increasing child age and the prospect of the IC not disappearing after middle childhood. The implications of the study for educational psychology, education and childcare professionals are discussed.

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Chapter 1 – Introduction

This chapter introduces the study by outlining the rationale and aims for the research study.

1.1 Rationale

As a trainee educational psychologist (TEP), I have an interest in all aspects of child development, in particular children's friendships and relationships. Until recently, I had however only considered the real life friendships and relationships of children. This changed when I assessed a young girl who brought her imaginary friend to our meeting. I had not yet, in my work as a TEP, come across the concept of an imaginary friend yet alone had a child actually bring theirs to an assessment with me. I decided to investigate this relationship a little more, and when I asked this young girl who knew about her imaginary friend, she said *"just me and you"*. I wondered why this young girl was keeping her imaginary friend, who quite apparently held a prominent place in her life, private from her parents and others.

As with all casework, I was due to meet with this girl's parents to feedback my assessment, and I questioned the relevance and possible importance of speaking to them about my experience of their daughter and her imaginary friend, but I was unsure as to the appropriateness of this, what their reaction would be, and whether they would be concerned. Do parents perceive imaginary friends as being a typical aspect of child development and are they happy for their children to have them, or do they have concerns about the presence of such imaginary phenomena? Before meeting with these parents it was therefore necessary to carry out some research into imaginary friends and how parents view them.

Whilst there was a body of research into the functions of imaginary companions and the characteristics of their creators, I was struck by the lack of research into parent attitudes towards imaginary companions and the inconclusive findings that were presented from the

little research that had been carried out. In order to support my understanding of this casework, as well as add to the body of research into parent attitudes to imaginary companions, I decided to do my doctorate research in this area. This study therefore examines the attitudes of parents towards their children having imaginary companions (ICs) and explores factors that may lead to variation in their views.

Research into ICs provides mixed reports on the views of parents; some parents have been found to show concern regarding their children's interaction with an IC (e.g. Newson & Newson, 1968) whilst others have been found to be encouraging (e.g. Manosevitz, Prentice & Wilson, 1973) and even discouraging of it (e.g. Brooks & Knowles, 1982). These mixed views are unsurprising given that parents have been provided with confusing and often conflicting information about ICs. Depending on the model of psychology used, and the era in which the research was conducted, there are mixed reports within academic studies as to whether an IC is a sign of something deficient or healthy in a child.

Research into ICs began just before the turn of the last century (Vostrovsky, 1895) when they were believed to be signs of mental illness in a child (Hoff, 2005). Renewed interest in the phenomenon came in the 1940s from the psychodynamic tradition (e.g. Ames & Learned, 1946; Bender & Vogel, 1941) and continued for a number of decades, with clinicians such as Sperling (1954) and Nagera (1969) examining the phenomenon through case studies of their child patients (Hoff, 2005). These studies reported children who had ICs as having personality defects; despite the children in the studies being recruited from clinics where they were particularly likely to have psychosocial and emotional difficulties (Taylor, 1999). This form of imaginative play therefore became associated with psychological and emotional problems (Bomford, 2011).

In the late 1960s, there was however a shift in perspectives regarding ICs, with research carried out by psychologists showing ICs to be positive for development (e.g.

Bouldin, Bravin & Pratt, 2002; Singer & Singer, 1990). Furthermore, Manosevitz et al. (1973) found that the phenomenon was far more common than previous research had shown, and throughout the 1970s and 1980s the evidence for the `normality' of ICs increased (Singer & Singer, 1990). Cohen (1996) describes the changes in societal attitudes towards ICs between the 1930s and 1960s, and states that in the 1930s child-care books specifically advised against children playing with ICs as it was thought they could easily lead to schizophrenia. However, by the 1960s, parenting books suggested that ICs were a sign of a good and creative mental health. These are powerful and confusing messages to send to parents.

The prevalence of ICs in children's lives is high. Recent research indicates that a high number of children create ICs (e.g. Taylor, Carlson, Maring, Gerow & Charley, 2004) that become incorporated into their everyday real life, and in some cases the routines of the family (Singer & Singer, 1990). More recent research also shows that whilst the majority of children who create ICs do so in the pre-school years or upon entering school, others create them as late as ten years of age (e.g. Hoff 2004-2005). Majors (2009) found that older children often keep their ICs a secret from parents, which raises questions about the views of parents regarding ICs in later childhood and beyond. Whilst many parents take their child's IC as evidence of a lively imagination and a creative mind, others wonder if the creation of an IC is compensatory and a sign of something deficient: that the child is emotionally distressed, having difficulties with social adjustment and making real life friends, or is experiencing communication difficulties (Taylor, 1999). As a result, parents appear to be unsure whether to encourage or discourage ICs.

Views expressed on online parent forums indicate that parents show some level of concern or uncertainty about the appearance of an IC in their child's life, and access these forums to inquire about other parents' views and experiences. One parent posted:

"Do any of your kids have imaginary friends? Are they an entity that pops up often? M has an imaginary sister. This has been going on for years.…For M, it's not like other kids that I've heard of, where they blame their imaginary friend for something that was broken or some

such. Her imaginary sister has a wild life, gets to go places M doesn't, gets to have things M doesn't have, etc. Just wondering how common this is and whether I should be worried?" (www.fertilethoughts.com/forums - accessed June 2012).

On another site, a parent asked:

"Do any of your kids have or have had an imaginary friend? My 4 year old son has had one for a few months….How long will this go on for and shall I embrace it or try and ignore it????"

Another parent replied:

"My daughter is 4 in August and the last few weeks [her imaginary friend] has been in our house and garden a lot! Apparently I was told imaginary friends are a sign of intelligence and imagination and they will pass. My daughter is an only child and I was having mum guilt over making up friends coz of no siblings but I don't think I will worry anymore!" (www.christianparentsforum.com – accessed June 2012).

The posts from these parents and many others that I came across indicate some level of concern with regard to their children having ICs, and express a need for advice from other parents or from research into ICs to reassure them that it is nothing to worry about. These forums indicate a need to explore the views of parents with regard to ICs, as it appears parents remain uncertain about their child's engagement with them.

Whilst these anecdotal reports suggest that parents are unsure about ICs and how to respond to them, there is actually very little research on parent views. From the research that does exist, we know little about the reasons for the views parents have and how they may have developed. The understanding of parent views is therefore limited and there is a need to explore the advantages and disadvantages they perceive, their concerns and the factors that lead to variation in their views. Given that children's play may be determined according to parents' own values regarding its appropriateness for their child (Taylor & Carlson, 2000), parents' views of their children having ICs requires investigation.

1.2 Research Aims

As highlighted by the rationale for this research into parent attitudes towards ICs, there are a number of anomalies and areas in which little is currently known. There is uncertainty as to whether parents are concerned about ICs and the nature of their concerns,

whether parents feel ICs are a sign of healthy development or social and emotional deficiency, whether parents are encouraging or discouraging of the behaviour, and whether there is a link with parent views of ICs and older children keeping their ICs secret from parents. Furthermore, little information is known about the factors that actually affect or lead to the formulation of parents' views, such as experience of the phenomenon or the age of the child.

Therefore, this research study aims to:

- Examine the views of parents whose children do and do not have ICs with regard to their encouragement of the behaviour, the advantages and disadvantages they perceive it to have, their level of concern and the nature of any concern, and their involvement with the behaviour;
- Examine factors that may influence or affect the views of parents with regard to their children creating and engaging with ICs, such as the age and gender of the child, the gender of the parent and the family culture. And;
- Gather the in-depth views and experiences of parents who have experienced the phenomenon with their child.

Chapter 2 – Literature Review

This chapter examines the existing literature associated with parent attitudes to their children having ICs. It begins by defining the cultural context of the study, what is meant by the term 'imaginary companion' and stating the prevalence rates for children with ICs according to various studies. It then examines existing literature on the characteristics of children with ICs, and the functions that they serve for a child, given that these may shape parent attitudes. Current literature on parent attitudes towards pretend play and ICs will then be reviewed, with particular focus given to the influence of parent gender, child gender, child age and parent culture. With all this research being considered, the review will then end with a more detailed outline of the research questions to be investigated by this study.

For details of the search for literature conducted for this study, please see Appendix A.

2.1 The cultural context

Throughout this literature review, reference will be made to the impact of culture upon the development of children's play and parents' attitudes towards it. This study is situated within a sociocultural perspective in its consideration of the influence of culture upon the development of parent attitudes towards pretend play and ICs, and how these may affect children's behaviour. The definition of culture can be broad, taking into account social class, religion, language, ethnicity, experience, tradition, values, faith and beliefs. Basavathappa (2004) suggests that culture is both a view of the world and a set of values, beliefs and traditions which are handed down from generation to generation. Furthermore, Helman (2007) suggests that culture also creates rules by which individuals are taught to behave, perceive the world, and relate to one another. Both definitions agree that values and beliefs are shared and passed on amongst people. The similarities in ideas and customs that individuals share may diversify or depend on the way people live in their community, and this can be affected by their social class, religious beliefs, gender and age. According to Burr

(2003), knowledge and understanding is created through interaction with and experiences of society and is dependent upon the time of such experience. Therefore, culture adapts as generations evolve, shaping human experience and developing new ideals.

Vygotsky (1978) proposed a sociocultural theory of development, with emphasis placed on the influence of society and culture on the development of human behaviour and ideals. Vygotsky asserted that all knowledge, and the knowledge-making tools (such as language and symbolism), afforded to a community are located within a sociocultural context (Edwards, 2005). According to this assertion, a community is likely to hold a series of beliefs and knowledge practices about how the world operates that have developed over generations and which together represent its history (Edwards, 2005). These beliefs and knowledge practices are located in the social customs and discourses which are developed and communicated through language and symbolism, and develop over the course of the current generation (Edwards, 2005). John-Steiner and Mahn (1996) suggest *"Young children, upon being born into their communities, are viewed as gradually appropriating the knowledge, and then the psychological tools of the people comprising their communities" (p. 193).*

Vygotsky suggested that the interrelationships among teaching, learning, and development are based on a sociocultural principle that maintains that development proceeds from the social (interpersonal) plane to the individual (intrapersonal) plane (Eun, 2010). Vygotsky (1978) claimed social primacy of development within the "*genetic law of development"*, which states that any function in human development appears first on the social plane, between two or more individuals, and then later on the individual plane, inside the individual. Concisely stated, *"development is the transformation of socially shared activities into personalised processes"* (Chen, Masur & McNamee, 2011 p.1140). The present study examines the attitudes of parents towards their children having ICs and takes on the viewpoint that such attitudes will be a product of the cultural context, the society in which

the individual lives and the embedded ideals of this context. It also takes on the view that cultures and communities evolve, and as such so do the belief systems of its members. The experiences of parents within society, influenced by dialogue and interactions with others, are therefore assumed to shape their views. This study therefore also assumes that attitudes towards pretend play activities such as ICs may be based upon developments in research into ICs and experiences of ICs which may in turn influence the general societal perception. Attitudes of parents towards acts such as ICs and other forms of pretend play may form in accordance with the general societal perception of what is acceptable behaviour. As such, parental and cultural views cannot be separated, with culture being passed on to children through the attitudes of parents. When considering the role of pretend play in child development, Piaget (1962) suggests that pretense is replaced by more reality-oriented thought as children enter the concrete operational stage. Given that the appropriateness of pretend play is arguable after a certain age within Western culture, parents who feel that ICs are inappropriate after a certain age are representing the general cultural view of their community.

In accordance with sociocultural theory, children are seen to be initial products of their parents' cultural ideals. If, as suggested by Vygotsky (1986), a child's cultural development first occurs between people on an interpersonal plane, parents are the main influence on the development of culture for a child. Thyssen (2003) suggests that the mother and father are the key persons in the development of culture for a child, in that they are central in the child's early contact with and beginning explorations of objects in their world. Therefore, knowledge and beliefs are socially and culturally defined as opposed to individually constructed. Interactions between children and adults are crucial for knowledge acquisition, meaning knowledge and beliefs are defined in accordance with the sociohistorical practices, beliefs and experiences of the community into which the child is born (Edwards, 2005). As such, parents and in later years peers and other adults, are

responsible for the enculturation of children into society in which the values and behaviours appropriate or necessary in that culture are acquired (Grusec & Hastings, 2007). Parents are therefore the 'guides' who shape the beliefs and practices of children, originating in a general societal view, and children, as active social constructivists, must then make sense of the knowledge supplied to them and reconstruct it within their understanding of the world.

Whilst the cultural context of a community may shape the beliefs of its members, its members also play a part in supporting the beliefs of the system to evolve. Children are born and raised in a cultural context but culture is not implicitly deterministic. There is a tension between culture and what the child does/believes. Thyssen (2003) suggests that as a child develops, they are drawn into a broader social context in which they meet other adults and children, and this influences their understandings, beliefs and actions. Development is a process of people's changing participation in the sociocultural activites of their communities (Rogoff, 2003) and development must therefore involve the acquisition of knowledge and belief practices that are important to the host as well as the community in which they live (Rogoff, 1990). Such a view is also assumed in this study when considering the possibility of continued involvement of children with ICs despite parental/cultural disapproval, and the relationship between parental views of and children's engagement with ICs.

2.1.1 Pretend play and cultural influences upon pretend play

Typically developing humans possess the function of imagination: an ability that is rarely observed in non-human primates (Gomez, 2008). Davis (2011) writes that *"on the rare occasions when pretending is observed in non-humans, the play is at a developmentally slower pace and involves scaffolding (Lyn, Greenfield & Savage-Rumbaugh, 2006)"* (p. 1) Imaginative play begins at around the age of 18 to 24 months and has been reported to have been observed in younger children also (Friedman & Leslie, 2007). Imagination is therefore a key aspect of typical human development; with the ability to pretend being one of the earliest displays of a child's imagination (Davis, 2011).

Through engaging in pretend play, children are provided with a strategy for making sense of the world by creating a safe environment that represents reality (Harris, 2000). Exploration through pretend play supports child development and allows investigation of a variety of scenarios in which the child maintains control over the outcome of the imagined situation (Davis, 2011). ICs are a form of pretend play that allows children to use their imagination to explore their world. *"At an early age, children are already engaging with pretend play to provide themselves with a stage of their own creation where anything can happen as they perform a scene, simultaneously taking on the role of the actor, director, and audience."* (Davis, 2011, p.1)

Pretend play is particularly susceptible to cultural variation. In her writings on the general influences on children's play across different cultures, Gosso (2010) states that there is a high level of cultural variation observed in the play of children within different societies. The author states that play and culture diversely interact, with play being seen as an effect of culture in that adult culture influences the play of the child, but also a cause of culture in that *"children's play reproduces but also changes culture over time"* (Smith, 2010 p.80).

Gosso (2010) suggests that children usually represent in their play the types of activities that they observe adults to be doing, and the values that are important for their society. Gaskins, Haight and Lancy (2007) describe three types of societies in which differing attitudes towards play prevail; *"culturally cultivated play"*, *"culturally accepted play",* and *"culturally curtailed play".* The 'culturally cultivated play' refers to a society of urban, middle-class Euroamerican families in which parents try to engage in the play with their children, and whose play is stimulated by adults as well as the objects that they are provided with. Parents within this society view play as important for the cognitive and social development of their children. The 'culturally accepted play' refers to societies in which parents have an expectation that their child will engage in play and who do not disapprove of it, but who do not actively encourage the play by investing themselves in it. Gosso (2010)

states that this attitude is typical of non-industrial and rural societies, and low income families. In these societies, the play partner of the child tends not to be an adult. The 'culturally curtailed play' refers to a society in which parents tolerate only small amounts of play and see play as a distraction from the work that they need to be carrying out. Gaskins (2000) found this to be the case for the Yucatan Maya people of Mexico. With regard to pretend play, Gaskins et al (2007) state that the appropriateness of pretense is particularly questioned by parents within this society and is likened to deceit and lying. It could be concluded from these research findings that parents' attitudes regarding the value of play for their child may be dependent upon cultural and societal influences. Given the diversity of urban communities in today's society, I would argue that the various cultural views of play described above may, to lesser or greater extents, exist within one community across different social classes and ethnic groupings. The present study was carried out in a multi-cultural and ethnically diverse London borough, where it was assumed that many of these cultural views could be represented. When carrying out this study, it was interesting to consider the different cultural views on play and the role that culture plays in the attitudes of parents towards the pretend play activities of their children, particularly their engagement with ICs.

For the purpose of this research, cultural influences upon parent attitudes towards ICs were examined specifically with regard to religion. Religion/faith is an organised collection of beliefs, cultural systems and world views, and is a core dimension of culture (Geertz, 1973). Geertz (1973) simply referred to religion as a "cultural system" in which culture and religion overlap, with religion influencing the way in which people create meaning, lead their lives and develop their social understandings and opinions. Cultural groups do however vary in the degree to which they adhere to religion and the cultural influence of religion is stronger upon some members of a cultural group than others, meaning variation in views and practice may exist within a religious group (Cohen & Hill,

2007). This is however also apparent between religious groups, and intercultural practice and understanding is historically affected by religion meaning that differing views towards social acts and behaviours such as ICs may be different between religious groups and thus influenced by their religious culture (Cohen & Hill, 2007). Such influences require investigation when considering parent views towards ICs, particularly because previous studies have found varying beliefs regarding the appropriateness of imaginary play for children from different religions (e.g. Carlson, Taylor & Levin, 1998). Previous literature on parent attitudes to ICs in the context of gender, age, ethnicity, and religion will be examined in section 2.5.

2.2 Definitions and prevalence rates

In order to understand parent views towards ICs, it is first necessary to define what constitutes as an 'imaginary companion' and outline the definition used in this study, and to gain an understanding of the commonality of their creation given that not all children create ICs. Hoff (2005) asserts that ICs can exist in various different forms. Most have a relatively stable 'core representation' although some details of their identity may change from time to time (Taylor, 1999). Some are human whilst others can be animals, aliens or monsters (e.g. Ames & Learned, 1946; Vostrovsky, 1895); some are extensions of real people or characters from books, television or films (e.g. Hurlock & Burstein, 1932; Manosevitz et al., 1973); some require nurturing whilst others are super-competent (e.g. Harter & Chao, 1992); and whilst most are well-behaved, some can be oppositional and non-compliant (e.g. Taylor, Carlson & Shawber, 2007). Some can exist as part of an imaginary world (e.g. Mackeith 1982) and ICs can differ in their longevity and frequency of appearance (Bomford, 2011).

Within the literature, a number of varying definitions for the term 'imaginary companion' have been used leading to variation in their reported incidence. Svendsen (1934) defined imaginary companions as *"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 the type of imaginary play where an object is personified or in which the child takes on the role of a character" (p988). More recent researchers (e.g. Gleason, 2002; 2005; Singer & Singer, 1990) extend Svendsen's original definition of an imaginary companion to include the personification of animals and objects such as stuffed toys. Taylor (1999) argues that the definition of an IC should incorporate personified objects because research indicates that imagery can be more vivid if there is an actual prop to guide it (e.g. Walton, 1990). It is therefore becoming increasingly uncommon for researchers to exclude this form of pretense in their definitions. Svendsen (1934) also alludes to impersonation as being excluded from the definition of an IC, and it is rare for this form of pretend play to be defined as an IC because the child themselves takes on the persona of the character. Furthermore, some researchers into ICs refer to children who create elaborate imaginary worlds known as 'paracosms' (e.g. Hoff, 2004-2005; Mackeith, 1982; Majors, 2009) and incorporate this form into the definition of an imaginary companion. Like many of the studies reviewed in this chapter, the definition of an 'imaginary companion' used in this study will incorporate invisible characters (a vivid invisible character in person or animal form), personified objects (stuffed toys and objects that adopt a vivid and imaginary character) and imaginary worlds (inhabited by imaginary companions in the forms described above) which all have an air of reality and are played with and referred to consistently over a period of at least several months.

Given the modification of Svendsen's original definition of ICs to include personified objects, identification of young children with ICs increased from 13.4% (Svendsen, 1934) to between 40 and 65% (Mauro, 1991; Singer & Singer, 1990). In a study of 100 US children, Taylor et al. (2004) found that 65% of children will have had an IC by the age of 7. Furthermore, Taylor et al. (2004) found that children aged 6-7 years old were just as likely to have an IC as children aged 3-4 years old. They therefore suggest that the results of their

study challenge the claim that the ultimate age for a child to play with an IC is 4 years old and that most children give them up when they begin school. In a study of 1800 children randomly selected from nine UK schools in a variety of socio-economic areas, Pearson, Rouse, Doswell, Ainsworth, Dawson, Simms, Edwards and Faulconbridge (2001) found that 46.2% of their sample of children aged between 5 and 12 years either currently or previously had an IC. Pearson et al. (2001) based their definition of an IC upon Svendsen's original definition (i.e. excluding personified objects), and found prevalence of ICs to be higher than previous research based on this definition suggested (e.g. 13-29% Harter & Chao, 1992; 28% Manosevitz et al, 1973). Pearson et al. (2001) suggest the difference in prevalence rate is accounted for by previous studies using a young, often pre-school, population. Pearson et al. (2001) suggest that their study supports the notion that experiencing ICs is part of mainstream child development, with the phenomenon being far more common among children than previously thought. Furthermore, the discovery that children older than 7 years create ICs that are often kept a secret from others will also be explored in section 2.5.1.2 of this literature review.

2.3 Characteristics of children with imaginary companions

Despite the high proportion of children found to have ICs, not all children do create them. This has meant that research into ICs has had a strong focus upon gaining insight into the personality traits, behaviours and cognitive development of the children who create these imaginary friends. Early research into ICs from the psychodynamic tradition considered ICs to be "the private fantasies of disturbed children" (Taylor, Cartwright & Carlson, 1993; p.285), and its main focus was in exploring the characteristics of children who created ICs. This focus has continued to prevail, with more recent research carrying out comparison studies of children who do and do not have ICs. This research describes a very different picture of children who create ICs (e.g. Mauro, 1991; Singer & Singer, 1990) compared to early research, and both these schools of psychological research will be

considered as having a possible impact upon the attitudes of parents towards their children having ICs.

Age, gender and birth order have been found to relate to children who create ICs. Children between the ages of 3- to 6-years are most likely to create ICs (Singer & Singer, 1990); however more recent research indicates that older children (e.g. Taylor et al, 2004; Majors, 2009), teenagers (e.g. Seiffge-Krenke, 2001) and even adults (Gupta & Desai, 2006) create or continue engaging with ICs. Research into older children with ICs is however limited and at an early stage, in part resulting from the private nature of these ICs. Most studies conducted into ICs use a sample of pre-school children and findings may be different for older children. Secondly, gender has been found to be a correlate of children who create ICs. A large number of studies that report the incidence of ICs for boys and girls in their sample have found that girls are more likely to create ICs than boys (e.g. Mauro, 1991; Taylor & Carlson, 1997). In their US study of 152 4-year old children, Taylor and Carlson (1997) found that 64% of their sample of children with ICs was girls, and similarly in her longitudinal study of children's engagement with ICs Mauro (1991) found the exact same percentage of her sample to be girls. On the other hand, Singer and Singer (1990) found there to be no significant difference in the number of boys and girls with ICs in their sample. Svendsen (1934) reported that 75% of her sample of children with ICs were female; however given that Svendsen only included children who engaged with invisible characters in her research and Singer and Singer (1990) included children who personified stuffed animals and impersonated characters, this may tell us something about differences in the way that boys and girls create and play with ICs. In fact, Carlson and Taylor (2005) demonstrated that children differ in their expression of fantasy play according to gender. It was found that girls were more likely to create an IC than boys, but that boys were however more likely than girls to impersonate characters. Harter and Chao (1992) also found gender differences in the type of IC created, with boys creating more super-competent type ICs with masculine and

physical aptitude and girls creating ICs whom they could care for and nurture. It appears that the claim that girls are more likely to create ICs than boys is ambiguous. Furthermore, research indicates that first born and only children (e.g. Bouldin & Pratt, 1999; Gleason, Sebanc & Hartup, 2000), and children with an age gap of 5 years or more between them and their siblings (Kaylan-Masih, 1986) are more likely to create ICs.

Early research (e.g. Svendsen, 1934, Vostrovsky, 1895) focussed upon the negative characteristics of children with ICs, with studies producing comprehensive lists of the problems and inadequacies of children who created and played with them. As a result, a number of negative stereotypes have developed of children with ICs that insinuate emotional damage, a weak grasp of reality, shyness and social awkwardness. Whilst dated in terms of the developments in IC research, it would be naïve to think that this research could not have an effect upon parent attitudes to the behaviour. In her study of 40 children aged 3 to 16 years with ICs living in a suburban community in Chicago, Svendsen (1934) reports that 35 of these children were described by their parents as having some form of personality disorder including an eagerness to be in the limelight and a fear of being outdone, timidity in the presence of other children, and evidence of dissatisfaction with the role of their sex. Ames and Learned (1946) also suggest that children who have ICs have flawed personalities and assert that the type of IC created by the child is indicative of the type of personality defect. Whilst the findings of these studies appear to provide some insight into the characteristics of children who create ICs, there are a number of fundamental flaws to them. Firstly, half of the sample of children used in Ames and Learned's study were clinical patients of a mental health professional and therefore were more likely to have some sort of social, emotional or behavioural difficulty. Secondly, neither of the studies included a matched comparison group of children of the same age who did not have ICs (Taylor, 1999). As a result, it is therefore unknown as to how many of the negative personality traits and behaviours reported by parents would also have been reported by parents of children

without ICs. When a comparison group of children who do not have ICs is included in the study of the characteristics of children who create them, no significant differences in personality traits are found between the two groups (Manosevitz et al., 1973; Singer & Singer, 1990). Hurlock (1972) regarded ICs negatively within her literature and stated that ICs were created by children in order to compensate for loneliness or inadequate social experiences. Whilst Hurlock does acknowledge that children who are well-adjusted and happy also create ICs, she advises that children be guided and helped to ensure that the tendency to play with ICs is overcome before they develop into routine patterns of social adjustment.

Since then, there has been a shift in the perception of children with ICs with research on children's fantasy play showing it to be both enjoyable for the child and a benefit for cognitive and social development (e.g. Bouldin, Bavin & Pratt, 2002; Gleason et al., 2000; Singer, 1977). Singer (1977) found that fantasising contributes to the development of vocabulary, imagery skills, the ability to tolerate periods of waiting and the mastery of empathy and social skills, whilst Bouldin et al. (2002) found that children with ICs used more sophisticated language than children without ICs, and Trionfi and Reese (2009) found that children with ICs told richer narratives than those without. Whilst such findings are encouraging for parents whose children have ICs and may positively influence their attitudes, the majority of children who had ICs involved in Bouldin et al.'s study were either first born or only children, meaning they may have been more exposed to language used by adults and this may have led to their use of more sophisticated language. Furthermore, Trionfi and Reese (2009) were unclear as to whether children's superior narrative skills resulted from relaying accounts of their ICs to others or were the drive for creating the IC as an outlet for their verbal expression.

In addition, children with ICs were described as happier in day-to-day activities and more verbally communicative (Manosevitz et al, 1973), whilst Taylor and Carlson (1997)

found that theory of mind was better developed in children with ICs. The authors provided an explanation that these children had practised understanding other people's minds through their play with ICs. Singer and Singer (1992) also found that children with ICs showed more positive emotionality and were less overtly aggressive whilst playing compared to children without ICs. Whilst this research provides insight into the characteristics of children who create ICs, they are not a homogenous group. Children with developmental difficulties such as autism or Down's Syndrome also create ICs, as well as people with mental health difficulties, and whilst the characteristics of children who create ICs cited by recent researchers gives a picture of a competent, intelligent and sociable child with good mental health, this may be limited to typically developing children.

Whilst popular culture often cites children with ICs as having superior intelligence and creativity, research findings in this area are mixed. Schaefer (1969) and Singer (1961) found that their samples of children with ICs performed better on measures of creativity and intelligence than children without ICs, whereas Manosevitz, Fling and Prentice (1977) and Pearson et al. (2001) found no differences between groups. On the other hand, Hoff (2005) in a sample of 10 year old children, half of whom had current or previous ICs, did in fact find children in their IC group to score higher on two of three estimates of creative potential, with the third measure showing a non-significant difference in the same direction. Further evidence is therefore needed on the creative and intellectual potential of children with ICs before any conclusions can be made; however the conception that these children have superior intellect and creativity may have an effect upon parents' views given that parents are often looking for signs of intellectual competence in their children and that there may be a societal perception that children with good intellect are superior to those with lesser intelligence.

There is a common perception that the fantasy/reality distinction is blurred for children with ICs (Taylor, 1999) and this has been found to concern parents (e.g. Brooks &

Knowles, 1982). Brooks and Knowles (1982) state that parents show concerns regarding children's engagement in fantasy because they feel it may remove the child from reality or lead to problems in truth telling, the development of unrealistic fears or daydreaming when problems are incurred. In contradiction to this, in a US study comparing 12 children with ICs with 15 children without ICs at the age of 4, Taylor et al. (1993) found that children with ICs did not differ in their ability to distinguish reality and fantasy from those without. In her book reviewing research into the characteristics of children with ICs, Taylor (1999) argues convincingly that children with ICs are able to distinguish fantasy from reality and are aware that their ICs are 'pretend'. Taylor explains that whilst the majority of children participating in her studies claimed their IC to be visible to others, this was a result of the child controlling their own pretense and not a result of fantasy/reality confusion regarding the IC (Davis, 2011). Children in Taylor's studies and in a study conducted by Davis (2006) were found to have a clear understanding that their IC was not real, repeatedly providing anecdotes about their companions followed by reminders to the researchers that they were "pretend". Furthermore, Taylor (1999) distinguishes between child controlled fantasy (pretend characters created by the child) and culturally created fantasy (e.g. Santa Claus), and concludes that child controlled fantasies, such as ICs, lend themselves to sophisticated fantasy/reality distinction by children. In addition, findings by Gleason (2002) into the social relationships between children and their ICs and real life friends or parents shows that children with ICs are able to recognise that their relationship with their IC is distinct from that with a friend or parent. Research therefore indicates that children with ICs are adept at distinguishing between fantasy and reality, and Gopnik (2009a) suggests it may in fact be the inability of parents and adults in understanding the viewpoint of the child regarding their fantasy/reality distinction that may be contributing to the view that children with ICs are unable to distinguish fantasy from reality. Rosengren and Hickling (2000) found that children who engage in fantasy may rely upon explanations for events provided by adults to support

their understanding of fantasy and reality. Perhaps parents who help facilitate the pretend play of children and who actively participate in the pretense with them feel reassured about their engagement with an IC because they play a part in helping the child to understand the distinction between reality and fantasy. This research further indicates the importance of exploring parents' views on ICs, given that children look to parents for guidance on creating boundaries between fantasy and reality.

2.4 Functions and purposes of imaginary companions

A focus of recent IC research has been in discovering the functions that these companions serve for the child (e.g. Hoff, 2004-2005; Majors, 2009). It is important to consider such research if we are to fully understand the attitudes and views of parents, and how they may have developed, with regard to the phenomenon.

Hoff (2004-2005) investigated the functions that ICs served for a group of twenty-six Swedish 10-year old children (16 girls and 10 boys) using semi-structured interviews with the children. Fourteen of the children interviewed had current ICs and twelve had previous ICs that had disappeared but could be accounted for. Hoff grouped the purposes that she found ICs served her sample of 10 year old children into five main categories: comfort or substitute for company, motivation and self-regulation, self-esteem enhancement, extended personality, and life quality enhancement. Hoff concludes that having an IC serves the child positively by compensating for a lack of psychological and emotional support from their outer environment, meaning they seek such support internally by creating an IC. This statement from Hoff causes me to consider how a parent would understand her findings. Would they feel alarmed and a sense of guilt that their child needs to compensate for a lack of emotional and psychological support through the creation of an IC, or would they feel pleased that their child is able to get the support that they need to cope with their difficulties independently? Whilst the findings of Hoff (2004-2005) provide insight into the functions served by ICs, Davis (2011) asserts that there is much benefit in getting an accurate

account of the phenomenon while it is occurring. She suggests *"By interviewing children while they are interacting with their IC on a day to day basis, the experimenter receives the most precise and vivid descriptions of what the IC reporter is experiencing. A retrospective account of an IC may not be as rich a source of information as an account of an IC being experienced in the present."* (p.7).

In her interpretative phenomenological analysis of the purposes that ICs serve for children, Majors (2009) looked at both younger children (aged between 5 and 10 years) and older girls (aged 11 years) living in a large urban city in the UK. In her study of younger children (3 boys and 2 girls), Majors identified purposes served for children by ICs to include enabling the expression of difficult feelings regarding events in their life and *"having a companion or playmate who was always available, overcoming feelings of boredom or loneliness, entertainment, releasing feelings of anger and upset, and support for difficult situations"* (p152). It was also found that whilst parents did appear to be aware of ICs within their children's lives, particularly with regard to the younger children, ICs that appeared to serve the purpose of meeting emotional needs for the child were kept more private than those serving an entertainment purpose.

Furthermore, in her study of 3 eleven year old White British girls, Majors identified that ICs served the purposes of providing a playmate when in particular there were no similar aged siblings to play with, helping to overcome boredom and loneliness, supporting with bullying and friendship difficulties, overcoming shyness and developing confidence, helping to deal with difficult life events, and having someone to talk to and listen to them in confidence, providing a good alternative to speaking to parents. In addition, it was found that the ICs of the older girls were kept a secret from parents, friends and school staff, with some of the girls feeling uncertain as to whether their parents would be supportive. Singer and Singer (1990) suggest that the privacy of ICs in older children may be indicative of growing cognitive skills, with fantasy being more internalised, whilst Majors (2009) suggests

that this internalisation may result from some awareness of the cultural stereotypes of children who have ICs.

Research therefore indicates that ICs serve a variety of beneficial functions for a child with regard to their social and emotional well-being. One of the most common explanations that researchers cite for a child's creation of an IC is that the child is lonely or does not have a real life person to play with, and is therefore seeking a social partner to fill this void (e.g. Gleason & Hohmann, 2006; Mauro, 1991; Svendsen, 1934; Singer & Singer, 1990). A child could therefore be said to have created an IC in order to fulfil a social desire they may have for companionship (Gleason, 2002). This has often caused both parents and professionals to worry that the child has created an IC because they have no real friends (Taylor, 1999). Ames and Learned (1946) and Nagera (1969) even implied that children who create imaginary companions do so because they lack social skills or real life friendships. In fact, research actually suggests that children with ICs are equally accepted by peers (Gleason, 2004) and have just as many real friends to play with (e.g. Bouldin & Pratt, 1999; Gleason et al., 2000) as children without ICs. Children with ICs have been found to choose real life social partners over their ICs when there is the opportunity to play with a real person, and the IC therefore serves the purpose of alleviating loneliness when no real life social partner is available (Manosevitz et al, 1973).

Another common function cited in research is 'scapegoating'. Some children have been found to use their IC to blame inappropriate behaviour on (e.g. Davis, 2006) and this has led to ICs being negatively linked by some parents to deceit and lying (Taylor, 1999). It is apparent from research conducted on ICs that they serve a number of purposes for children, and Davis (2011) suggests that no matter what function the IC serves, their creation seems to depend on what the child has a need for at that time in their life, which may impact on the views of parents.

2.5 Attitudes of parents towards pretend play and imaginary companions

Given that children who create ICs may do so for a variety of reasons and may be portrayed as having certain characteristics that are both positive and negative, parents may therefore value and/or worry about their child's engagement with an IC. This section of the literature review examines existing research into parents' attitudes towards pretend play and ICs, and considers the factors that may lead to variation in views towards ICs and pretend play.

Gleason (2005) examined the beliefs and attitudes of parents in an urban USA community with regard to their child's engagement in pretend play as a function of whether the child had an IC (invisible character or personified object) and the gender of the child. 73 mothers and 40 fathers of pre-school children aged between 36 and 69 months were surveyed about their children's pretend play, their own attitudes towards pretense and the environments that they provided for their children's pretend play. The findings by Gleason revealed that parents of both children with and without ICs viewed their children's play similarly, particularly their predilection for pretend play. Parental ratings however showed girls to be rated as more highly engaged in pretend play than boys. Given that it was found that parents' attitudes towards pretend play were unrelated to whether their child had created an IC or not, it would appear that parents do not feel that the fantasy play of children with ICs is extreme or out of the ordinary.

Research does however indicate the influence of context upon parents' attitudes towards their child's engagement in pretend play, in particular for children with ICs. Gleason (2005) found that mothers of children with ICs reported that they would mind their child engaging in pretend play when guests were present more than mothers of children who did not report their child as having an IC, with the opposite findings for fathers. On the other hand, Brooks and Knowles (1982) found that 55% of fathers said they would discourage their child from bringing their IC to the Thanksgiving table when an abundance of guests were

present compared to 10% of mothers. Could it be the case that whilst parents' attitudes towards their children having an IC are encouraging or neutral (Manosevitz et al., 1973), the context of such play mediates this attitude and results in parents placing more limits upon the pretend play that children with ICs engage in? There is a need to examine the influence of context upon parent views of the behaviour, as well as differences in the views of mothers and fathers (see section 2.5.1.1). Furthermore, the finding by Gleason (2005) that fathers of children with ICs were less likely to limit the pretense of their child in front of guests than fathers of children without ICs suggests that experience of the phenomenon may also play some part in the development of positive parent attitudes (see section 2.5.1.3).

Gleason (2005) also examined parents' attributions of pretend play to their children's development. Significantly more mothers of children with ICs endorsed language development as a benefit of pretense compared to mothers of children without ICs. Furthermore, significantly more fathers of children with ICs compared to those without cited social development as a benefit of pretense. It would appear that parents of children with ICs place greater focus on the cognitive and social benefits of pretense, but that mothers and fathers value pretense differently, with mothers placing greater focus upon the cognitive and educational implications and fathers focusing more on the social aspects of the play. This would also explain the different nature of their concerns regarding their children's engagement in pretend play, with mothers in the study found to be more concerned about fantasy/reality distinction and fathers more concerned about the behaviour becoming obsessive to the exclusion of others.

Whilst the findings of Gleason (2005) provide important insight into the views of parents towards pretend play, there are a number of limitations to the study. Firstly, as a result of the small sample size of parents whose children did have an IC (n=30), the sample could not be split according to type of IC (18 children had personified objects and 12 children had invisible companions). Gleason et al. (2000) suggest that parents' attitudes towards

invisible characters and personified objects may differ, and examining the views of parents according to type of IC may have provided further insight into the views of parents towards pretend play. Secondly, the sample size did not allow for the views of parents to be examined according to child age, which again may have given further insight into the attitudes of parents towards pretend play. Lindsey and Mize (2001) found that fathers' perceptions of pretend play become more negative as children get older.

The research conducted by Gleason (2005) does however raise a number of questions about the attitudes of parents towards pretend play. Whilst consideration was given to whether their child had an IC or not in Gleason's study, little recent, particularly qualitative, research has been carried out on parents' views of and attitudes towards their children having an IC.

Given the early negative research into the characteristics of children with ICs (e.g. Ames and Learned, 1946; Hurlock, 1972; Vostrovsky, 1895), it is not surprising that there are variable reactions to ICs by parents. A small number of past studies have found that some parents do express a level of concern with regard to their children having ICs. In a UK study carried out by Newson and Newson (1968) in which parents of 4 year old children in Nottinghamshire were interviewed about their children's ICs, it was found that whilst many parents were accepting of them, some parents expressed worries with regard to this type of play. One mother was quoted as saying "I've said to him, you know, 'That's never happened, you're imagining things!' I've told him, 'Now that's *wrong*, you've got a vivid imagination'" (in Taylor, 1999). Parents in Newson and Newson's (1976) study which used a sample of 7-year old children in a British urban society felt that there was something disturbing about a child who was so far out of touch with reality that they needed to create an IC and that such behaviour may later lead them into dishonesty, or may limit the control that the parents have upon their child's behaviour. Despite the disapproval of parents in their study, Newson and Newson found that children still engaged with their IC, and Taylor and Carlson (2000)

suggest that non-social fantasy play, such as having an IC, may be less suppressed by parent disapproval than more social forms of fantasy play.

Following the finding that parents show some concern about their children's ICs, Brooks and Knowles (1982) surveyed 100 mothers and fathers of 3- to 5-year old children from a US lower-middle-class urban setting on their views of ICs using hypothetical scenarios. It was found that only 22% of parents would encourage the behaviour, with 42% stating that they would neither encourage nor discourage it, and 36% stating that they would actively discourage the behaviour. Whilst these results appear to show that parents are not encouraging of their children's engagement with ICs, further exploration of the questions posed to parents would indicate some negative bias and that attitudes may be more reflective of a 'nuisance factor' that having an IC in the family may cause. One example of a scenario posed to parents was asking them how they would feel about a child insisting that a place be set at the Thanksgiving table for their IC. 60% of parents stated that they would discourage this behaviour. It seems that the word "insist" and the scenario of the Thanksgiving table which is usually crowded and a potentially stressful time for parents who are entertaining others would indicate a somewhat biased scenario. Despite this, the negative response to this scenario by parents would lead one to again question the influence of context upon parent views of ICs, with Thanksgiving often being a time with extended family and friends present. Would parents' reactions to the insistence of laying a place at the table on a regular evening mealtime be equally negative and are their views actually reflective of some social embarrassment associated with the IC? Whilst the scenarios posed were somewhat biased in that most parents would find the IC to be inconvenient, parents in Brooks and Knowles' sample also reacted negatively to more neutral scenarios. Only 31% of parents would encourage their child to go outside and play with their IC in response to being asked to play quietly. Whilst Brooks and Knowles (1982) have looked at parent views on children having ICs, the study is dated given the developments in IC research and

parental/cultural attitudes may have changed. Furthermore, the surveys carried out in Brooks and Knowles' study were with both parents whose own children did and did not have ICs, yet no distinction or comparison was made. This leaves questions around the influence that experience of the phenomenon may have upon parent attitudes. I feel it is important to ask parents about their attitudes to the ICs of their own children and then compare these to parents whose children do not have ICs in order to understand the attitudes of parents and how they have developed.

In contradiction to the findings of Brooks and Knowles, the research findings of Manosevitz et al. (1973) indicated parents to be more encouraging of their children's ICs. 50% of the 63 parents of 4-year old children surveyed (the majority of whom were mothers) from a middle-sized Southwestern US city who had reported their child as having an IC would encourage their child to engage with it, 43% would ignore the behaviour and 7% would discourage it. In addition to this, 62% of these parents felt that the creation of the IC was "good for their child", whilst 42% felt that the imaginary friend had little effect upon their child and 4% felt it had a "harmful effect". The difference in attitudes found by Manosevitz et al. (1973) and Brooks and Knowles (1982) could be attributed to the positive effect of experience of the phenomenon, given that Manosevitz et al. (1973) only surveyed parents whose children had ICs. Whilst the findings of Manosevitz et al. (1973) came from parents whose children had ICs, no further exploration of their views was carried out in order to gain a greater understanding of them and the experiences that parents had that led to their development. Furthermore, the study may provide a greater indication of mothers' views as opposed to parents in general due to the high number of mothers in the sample. Gleason (2005) suggests that both mothers' and fathers' views need to be addressed in studies examining parent perceptions.

The negative views of parents that are reported in some literature (e.g. Newson & Newson, 1986, 1976; Brooks & Knowles, 1982) can be attributed to parents equating fantasy

behaviours with deceit and lying: a view especially apparent in studies that look at cultural and religious factors associated with parent views of pretend play (e.g. Taylor & Carlson, 2000; Carlson, Taylor & Levin, 1998). Newson and Newson (1976) suggest that deceit and fantasy were found to be placed in the same universal category of child behaviours by mothers in their study. British mothers of 7-year old children in their sample similarly rated occurrences involving lying and those involving ICs when asked to rate different child behaviours. This association of ICs with deceit may however be more apparent in the views of mothers. Brooks and Knowles (1982) found that mothers more strongly correlated ICs with deceit than fathers, who did not feel they were linked. These findings therefore imply that mothers may perceive fantasy acts such as ICs and deceit as part of the same global category of child behaviour, thus resulting in a negative view of the behaviour.

In her study into the individual and environmental factors associated with the development of an IC, Svendsen (1934) interviewed mothers of 40 children aged between 3 and 16 years from a suburban community in Chicago, who reported their child having had an IC, about their attitudes towards the phenomenon. Only one mother expressed alarm with regard to the IC, with her anxiety being based on her stating her child to be an "awful liar". Two other mothers raised concerns with regard to how the phenomenon should be handled, with one stating that she actively discouraged the IC because she felt her child used the companion as an excuse for evasion. It was however found that 36 of the mothers interviewed would encourage their child to engage with an IC because the play gave pleasure to the child and amusement to the parents. Mothers did overall feel that the IC had little significance beyond substitution for real companions when they are unavailable: a view that is unsurprising given the infancy of IC research at the time.

In a recent study into mothers' perceptions of the purposes served by ICs for their children and their impact on the lives of their creators, Bomford (2011) interviewed six mothers whose children had a current or previous IC. In general, the mothers interviewed

thought ICs were a positive force in their children's lives and helped to provide insight into their inner world. Bomford however found that conditional acceptance was the most common reaction of parents to their children's ICs. Although several mothers expressed amusement and fascination at the insight they were given into their children's fantasy world, they also had reservations about certain aspects of their children's relationship with their pretend friends, including the age of the child and their ability to distinguish fantasy from reality. Whilst parents may be positive about their children's ICs, it would appear that their positivity may be contingent upon their child being deemed to be typically developing and may be influenced by a cultural view of what is acceptable behaviour for a child of a certain age.

The literature reviewed indicates not only opposing views on the value of ICs between psychologists but also amongst parents. Parents express a range of positive and negative views about the significance of ICs, with some viewing them as signs of high intelligence and creativity (e.g. Manosevitz et al., 1973), and others fearing the child is unable to distinguish fantasy and reality and is experiencing emotional disturbance (Taylor & Carlson, 2000). Taylor and Mannering (2007) suggest that this range of parental views regarding ICs raises a number of interesting questions around the basis of their views. Are their views a function of culture and religion? Do they stem from experiences of ICs with their children? And to what extent do these views influence their children's fantasy behaviours?

2.5.1 Factors associated with variation in parent views of pretend play and ICs

Whilst there is a growing body of research on the characteristics of children with ICs and the purposes they serve, there is a dearth of research into parent attitudes toward ICs particularly with regard to the factors that lead to variation in these views. Some of the factors that may affect parent views towards pretend play and ICs are considered below.

2.5.1.1 The relationship between child and parent gender and parent views of ICs

Haight, Parke & Black (1997) suggest that parents' gender roles may influence their beliefs and attitudes about pretend play. A number of researchers have looked at the type of play mothers and fathers engage in with their children and whether this is affected by parent gender and child gender (e.g. Langlois & Downs, 1980; Roopnarine & Mounts, 1985; Lindsey & Mize, 2001). Findings indicate that mothers engage in and facilitate more pretend play with their children whilst fathers engage in and facilitate more physical play with their children. In a study of 33 pre-school children from 29 European-American, middle- and upper-middle-class families, Lindsey and Mize (2001) found that parent-daughter dyads, in particular mother-daughter dyads, engaged in more pretend play than parent-son dyads. It was also found that during the physical play session, father-son dyads engaged in more physical play than father-daughter dyads. Such findings would suggest that parents facilitate play according to their beliefs about appropriate gender-typed behaviour and that such beliefs therefore do have an influence upon the types of play children may learn to engage in. This play preference pattern may encourage children to view pretend play as being more appropriate for the female gender role and physical play as more appropriate for the male gender role (Lindsey & Mize, 2001). Given that engagement with ICs is part of pretend play; could it be the case that parents encourage daughters to engage in the behaviour more than they do sons thus shaping their child's play according to their beliefs about its appropriateness? Gleason (2005) found that both mothers and fathers reported providing more fantasy-oriented toys for daughters than for sons, and a higher proportion of fathers of boys than girls reported that they would limit pretense when out at a restaurant.

It has also been found that parents may influence the type of play that children engage in with their peers. Lindsey and Mize (2001) found that children whose parents engaged in more pretend play with them also engaged in more pretense with peers,

whereas children whose parents engaged in more physical play with them engaged in more physical play with peers. In line with this, Bornstein et al (1999) found that mothers engaged in more frequent symbolic play with daughters than with sons, and that these interactions between the mother and daughter predicted peer pretend play. Such findings would therefore suggest that parents may contribute to children's gender-typed play behaviours with peers and highlights the powerful effect that parental attitudes towards play may have upon their child's play preference and behaviour.

Whilst boys and girls have been found to differ in their expression of fantasy play (Harter & Chao, 1992) and I have suggested that this may be a result of parents facilitating play depending on their cultural beliefs about appropriate gender-typed behaviour, there is little evidence that parents view sons' and daughters' engagement with an IC differently. Brooks and Knowles (1982) found no effect of child gender upon the views of parents regarding their children having ICs, although the authors claim that parents who were interviewed showed slightly more encouragement of their daughters' engagement with an IC compared to sons'. Gleason (2005) also found that overall parents valued or worried about their child's engagement in pretense for similar reasons for both child genders, but like the parents in Brooks and Knowles' study, mothers were found to rate daughters' involvement in pretend play more positively than sons'.

Whilst Brooks and Knowles (1982) found few differences between mothers and fathers in their study, they found that fathers interviewed were more discouraging of ICs than mothers. Similarly, the findings by Gleason (2005) showed that in general mothers held more positive views than fathers regarding pretend play, and were more likely to encourage the pretend play of daughters than sons, with no such difference found for fathers. As suggested previously, Gleason (2005) also found that in certain contexts, mothers and fathers of children with ICs differed in their acceptance of pretend play. Mothers and fathers

therefore appear to show some variation in their views of ICs and the contexts in which they are deemed appropriate.

The evidence for differences in the views of mothers and fathers towards ICs and general pretend play is however inconclusive, and whilst there is some evidence that parents are more encouraging of daughters' engagement with ICs, they appear to view the pretend play and IC behaviours of sons and daughters similarly. Further investigation into whether the views of parents regarding ICs vary according to parent gender and child gender is needed before any firm conclusions can be drawn, and further examination of the interaction between parent and child gender is also needed to better understand the views of parents.

2.5.1.2 The relationship between child age and parent views of ICs

Piaget (1962) described the pretense of young children as an "immature form of thinking that is replaced by more reality-oriented thought as children enter the concrete operational stage of development" (Taylor & Mannering, 2007, p.237). More recent researchers however argue that fantasy play does not disappear in middle childhood and adolescence but in fact goes underground as a result of cultural expectations and overt discouragement (e.g. Cohen & Mackeith, 1992; Pearson et al., 2001; Singer & Singer, 1990). Recent research in fact indicates that ICs are evident in older children, and not limited to those in pre-school (e.g. Hoff 2004-2005; Pearson et al., 2001; Seiffge-Krenke, 1993; Taylor et al., 2004).

In their study into the beliefs and participation of parents in their children's pretend play, Haight et al (1997) observed and interviewed 29 mothers and 29 fathers (29 married couples) of European-American middle-class backgrounds engaging separately in pretend play with their child and then information regarding their beliefs about play was collected in an interview. Haight et al. (1997), who found no difference between the views of mothers and fathers regarding the developmental significance of pretend play in toddlers and early

pre-schoolers, suggests that attitudes of parents, especially fathers, may change as a function of their child's age; as their child gets older, fathers may grow more concerned about their child's engagement in pretend play and therefore put greater limits upon it. This suggestion is supported by Lindsey and Mize (2001) who found that fathers' involvement in pretend play with their child negatively correlated with the age of the child as they moved from pre-school to elementary school.

The suggestions by Haight et al. (1997) and Lindsey and Mize (2001) that parents' attitudes towards pretend play change as a function of their child's age are especially important given findings that older children also create and engage with ICs. In a study of 1800 children, Pearson et al (2001) found that 33-43% of 5-9 year old children reported having current ICs, with at least 9% of the 12-year olds in the sample reporting a current IC. It was also found that the reported incidence declined with age and some older children who had stated not having an IC when asked within the classroom later informed the researcher interviewing them that they did in fact have one. The incidence rates noted for older children may therefore be an underestimate as a result of reluctance to admit to having an IC.

Hoff (2004-2005) also found that for her group of children aged 10-years old, still having an IC at that age or thinking about their past ICs appeared to evoke feelings of awkwardness in some of the children interviewed. Hoff suggested that children in her sample appeared to be embarrassed and even ashamed about the fantasy of their IC, and described occasions in which they had felt awkward when other people had unexpectedly appeared whilst they were engaging with their IC. One 10 year old girl in Hoff's study talked about feeling ashamed with regard to engaging with her IC, and this particular child engaged with her IC in the bathroom only. When asked about whether she engaged with her IC outside of the bathroom, she said *"No, I don't often have them outside, I mean, I always have them in the bathroom. I mean, then my family comes and or somebody in my family*

and says: 'What are you doing?' And then I feel ashamed" (Hoff, 2004-2005, p.161). Furthermore, one 10-year old child interviewed maintained that his IC had disappeared at the age of 7-years whilst the tape recorder was running, but then told the interviewer that he still played with his IC during the summer holidays after the tape had been stopped. Another 10-year old child kept her IC profoundly private and was said to have been anxious with regard to her deviance because of having an IC, saying *"This is really very secret…I have really not told anyone about this"* (p.161). Just over 50% of the aged 10 children who were in Hoff's study stated that their ICs were a secret, and 27% of the 100 children who were in Taylor et al.'s (2004) study stated that they had ICs that their parents were unaware of, with one child actually requesting that the researchers did not tell their parent.

The finding that older children in Hoff's study felt embarrassed and even ashamed about their IC suggests a perception that the behaviour is deemed inappropriate after a certain age. Are these children picking up on cultural, societal and/or parental views that their ICs are unacceptable or childish behaviour? It seems necessary to explore the views of parents regarding their children having ICs in middle and later childhood, and early adolescence to gain a deeper understanding of why older children feel the need to keep their ICs a secret. Taylor (1999) suggests that *"even parents who have some admiration for the creativity involved in a pre-schooler's invention of a pretend friend might express concern when the child is still playing with the imaginary companion beyond the pre-school years"* (p.53). Furthermore, research indicates that adolescents also have ICs, most commonly in the form of diaries. Seiffge-Krenke (1993, 1997) found that socially competent and creative 15-year old adolescents frequently wrote to ICs using diaries.

Although there is relatively little research into the fantasy play of those in middle and late childhood, and adolescence, there is evidence that fantasy play does not stop after the preoperational stage, as asserted by Piaget. As a result of these claims, there may be a societal view that fantasy behaviours should decline with age, and continuing fantasy play,

such as engagement with ICs, could be taken as a sign of inappropriate development or behaviour, and even underlying social and emotional difficulties. Do parents feel this way and are children therefore picking up on such cultural views, meaning their ICs go underground? There is a need to examine the views of parents regarding ICs in relation to their child's age.

2.5.1.3 The relationship between experience and parent views of ICs

Whilst a small number of researchers have sought the views of parents regarding ICs (e.g. Brooks and Knowles, 1982; Manosevitz et al, 1973), no comparison was made between the views of parents with and without ICs, and no acknowledgement of the impact of experiencing the phenomenon upon the views of parents was made. Through comparing the views of parents with and without experience of ICs, it would be expected that the processes that lead to the development of parent views regarding them will be uncovered and greater insight into the phenomenon achieved.

In her study, Svendsen (1934) states that *"From contact with approximately 800 mothers in this community during the period when the cases were selected, it was observed that the experience is less likely to be regarded as harmful by those who have witnessed it in the case of their own children than when it is a phenomenon that has never been encountered"* (p.992). Whilst this is an interesting finding with regard to parent attitudes, Svendsen states earlier in her article that *"In the presentation of the study, mention was made of the theory that imaginary companions are thought to be a phenomenon characteristic of intelligent children, to allay any fear that it may be regarded as abnormal"* (p.989). Such a statement leads me to question the validity of the findings with regard to parent attitudes for two reasons. Firstly, I feel that making this statement to parents automatically biases their views to perceiving the phenomenon in a positive way, and secondly, this statement was only made to parents of children who had ICs in her study and not to those whose children did not, which could potentially have affected the views of

these parents. Despite the criticisms made, it would appear from the research carried out by Svendsen that the attitudes of parents towards ICs may be related to the experience that they have of them with their own children.

Furthermore, Manosevitz et al. (1973) and Svendsen (1934) found that parents in their study were more encouraging of their children's ICs than parents in Brooks and Knowles' (1982) study. The sample of parents asked about their views of ICs in Manosevitz et al.'s and Svendsen's studies were all parents whose children had current or previous ICs, whereas parents surveyed in Brooks and Knowles' study were a mix of parents whose children had and had never had an IC. The finding that parents in the latter study were less encouraging of the phenomenon may tell us something about the relationship between experience of ICs and the views of parents towards them. In order to develop a greater understanding of parent attitudes to ICs, and the experiences and contributing factors to the development of these attitudes, the research reported in this thesis compares the attitudes of parents who are both aware and unaware of their children having ICs.

2.5.1.4 The relationship between culture, ethnicity and religion, and parent views of ICs

There is limited research into ICs in non-western communities, as indicated by the majority of the previous research reviewed being carried out in US communities, and some UK or Swedish contexts. Given that this study takes on the premise that parent views are indicative of their cultural context, it is important to consider cultural variations in parent views to pretend play and ICs. A small number of researchers have looked at the influences of ethnicity and religion upon parents' facilitation of pretend play and their views on ICs (e.g. Carlson, Taylor & Levin, 1998; Farver & Howes, 1993; Taylor & Carlson, 2000).

Within many Western middle–class families, children's involvement in fantasy is on the whole strongly encouraged by parents and engagement in pretend play is considered beneficial to children (Göncü & Gaskins, 2007). Taylor, Miner, Legorreta, Luu & Perez (2004) compared the attitudes of 40 parents from a mid-size US city with 28 parents from Mexico

City towards their children's engagement in role play. The parents were told stories about children engaging in a variety of behaviours involving different types of pretend play and were then asked to describe what the children were doing and provide their own reactions to the behaviour. No differences were found between the US and Mexican parents' reactions to pretend play involving object substitution (such as pretending a wooden block is an item of food); however the Mexican parents were significantly less approving of role play involving ICs than US parents. With regard to their children's engagement with ICs, Mexican parents expressed a number of concerns including being afraid that it was something supernatural and being frightened by children's accounts that they could see the IC. A further difference in the views of the US and Mexican parents was in their association of pretending with lying. 25% of the Mexican parents associated acts of pretending with lying, whereas none of the US parents made this association.

According to Western theorists, the pretend play of younger children originates in early parent-child interaction (Farver & Howes, 1993). Farver and Howes (1993) looked at cultural differences within American and Mexican mother-child pretend play and found that mothers guide the development of their children's pretend play according to their own cultural beliefs and perceived norms. Results indicated a number of cultural variations in the promotion of pretend play in the American and Mexican cultures, with the American mothers directly organising their children's pretend play by providing objects and ideas for the play, as well as engaging in it themselves; and pretend play not originating in the mother-child interaction within the Mexican families observed. Instead, Mexican mothers based their interactions with children on real life work models. The sample size for this study was small (60 children and their mothers) but the results indicate cultural variations in parents' attitudes towards pretend play.

Carlson, Taylor & Levin (1998) suggest that religious ideology is an aspect of the cultural context that results in varied attitudes towards pretend play, with the phenomenon

of ICs being particularly sensitive to culture having an effect upon the way in which adults and parents perceive the behaviour. In their study, members of the Mennonite faith were found to be suspicious of ICs, fearing they were indicative of psychopathology or even demonic possession. In an exploration of East Indian families' attitudes towards pretend play, Mills (1992) found that entities that children talk to that cannot be seen are referred to as invisible as opposed to imaginary because this assumes that the child is communicating with a real being who was part of the child's past life or exists on a spiritual realm. As a result of this, these Hindu families regard the notion of an IC favourably with their spiritual faith significantly contributing to this view. Taylor and Carlson (2000) reviewed ethnographic studies, case histories, and anecdotes from studies with Hindu, Fundamentalist Christian, and Mennonite communities, and concluded that religious beliefs have an influence upon the reactions of an adult to a child's fantasy play. Depending upon the religious beliefs of the adult, a child's interaction with an invisible being can be seen as an expression of pretense or as real-world interaction with a spiritual being. The interaction of a child with a spiritual being may be seen as positive, as found in the case of Hindu parents, or as potentially harmful, as found in the case of fundamentalist Christian parents. One fundamentalist Christian mother of a 7 year old boy told the researchers, *"Around our house we try to keep our kids from having imaginary companions. I think they are associated with the devil, and it would be very bad if they had imaginary companions"* (Taylor, 1999 p.57). Despite the negative views of parents with regard to a child's engagement in pretend play or with an IC, Taylor and Carlson (2000) found that many children still partake in the pretense, but the form their pretense takes and the degree to which it is kept secret from others is influenced by the cultural perspective of their religious community.

Given that this study is based on the premise that parents' views are representative of their cultural context, issues of gender, age, faith and community are assumed to be related to what is deemed as appropriate play for children. However, research into the role

of culture in parent attitudes to ICs is somewhat sparse and the number of studies carried out with regard to ICs in diverse UK communities is limited, with the majority of studies carried out within suburban US communities. Whilst there are general similarities between the western cultures, it can also be argued that there are a number of significant differences. In order to contribute to the research on parent attitudes of ICs, the present study was carried out with parents in a large multi-cultural north London borough. As a result, it was hoped that a multi-cultural sample would be obtained that captured the views of parents from a range of cultural backgrounds who are living within the same society, thus capturing intra- and inter-cultural variation.

2.6 Research questions

Children's engagement in fantasy and pretend play has been shown to play an important role in cognitive and social development, and the creation of ICs is one aspect of such play. From the literature reviewed, it is apparent that there are varying views of parents towards their children's engagement with ICs, and the previous mixed reports of the characteristics of children who create ICs and their function may have led to some confusion for parents as to the benefits of this phenomenon. There is also evidence of a number of factors that may be associated with varying views of ICs, such as the age and gender of the child, the gender of the parent, and their religious and ethnic background. The finding that ICs go underground in middle childhood and that some older children feel ashamed and embarrassed to admit to having an IC further supports the need for exploration of parental opinion on the phenomenon.

This study aimed to provide insight into the views of parents by exploring their encouragement of the phenomenon, their acceptance of it in a variety of contexts, the advantages and disadvantages they feel there are for their child, and their level and nature of concern. These views were examined with regard to experience of ICs, parent gender, child gender, child age and parent religion. It was hoped that the study would provide not

only information on parent attitudes and the factors that affect their views, but also provide an understanding of whether the views of parents with children with ICs differ from those without. Furthermore, an in-depth understanding of the views of parents who have experienced the phenomenon with their children was sought, in order to gain a greater insight into parent views of ICs. Given that some parents appear to access parent forums to discuss their concerns about their children's ICs, the ways in which parents with children with ICs have acted upon their concerns was also explored.

With this in mind, the research questions addressed by this study are:

1. What are the attitudes of parents regarding their children having imaginary companions: Do they/would they encourage their child's engagement with an imaginary companion, become involved in the interaction, and limit the play in certain contexts? And do parents' views vary according to experience of imaginary companions, parent gender, child gender, religion, and child age?

2. What do parents feel are the advantages and disadvantages of having an imaginary companion, and what factors are associated with their perceptions of these?

3. Are parents concerned about their children having imaginary companions, and if so what is the nature of their concerns? What factors are associated with their level and nature of concern?

Chapter 3 - Methodology

This chapter describes the research design, epistemological and methodological considerations underpinning this study. The two phases of data collection for this study will be outlined and the rationale for the selection of methods and participants discussed. Research tool construction, the approach to data analysis and ethical considerations will be presented.

3.1 Research Design and Paradigm

3.1.1 Epistemological Approach

The approach taken when considering the methodological and epistemological issues in this research is pragmatic (Burke Johnson & Onwuegbuzie, 2004; Guba & Lincoln, 1994, 2005). Such a perspective assumes a position that what is useful is of greater importance than what is true and avoids the use of the metaphysical concepts of "truth" and "reality" that have caused endless debate (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2003). Concern is therefore not over absolute knowable truth of the research findings but over how useful they are in the real world. This means that the research questions are considered to be more important than either the method used or the paradigm that underlies the method (Teddlie & Tashakkori, 2009). Tashakkori and Teddlie (1998) state, "Study what interests and is of value to you, study it in the different ways that you deem appropriate, and utilise the results in ways that can bring about positive consequences within your value system" (p.30).

Pragmatism supports the use of both qualitative and quantitative research methods in the same research study and within multistage research programs (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 1998). The pragmatist stance assumes that there is no single, best 'scientific' method that can lead the way to indisputable knowledge. In this way, the pragmatist stance allows methods drawn from different research paradigms to be brought together. It also assumes that knowledge is provisional, and what we understand as truth today may not be seen as such in the future. Knowledge is seen as a product of our times, and can never be absolute

because it is dependent upon the historical era and the cultural context within which it is produced. The quest for absolute 'truth' is therefore seen as unrealistic (Denscombe, 2007).

The underlying philosophical stance of pragmatism is however open to misinterpretation. There is a concern that this type of research can be associated with an 'anything goes' approach (Denscombe, 2007). This is not the case for this research. My decision to adopt a pragmatist stance was based on the view that it is most important to select a research design that best addresses the research questions to be investigated, instead of the results of the study being affected by the requirement to follow either a positivist or interpretivist stance.

3.1.2 Mixed Methods Design

This study is concerned with gaining the views and attitudes of parents, and I am therefore interested in their thoughts and feelings on the topic being investigated, as well as the various meanings attributed to their opinions (Willig, 2003). A mixed methods approach can enhance the research findings by providing a fuller and more complete picture of what is being researched (Denscombe, 2007; Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2003). Given that this is a sparsely explored area, I feel that it is important to gain the general opinions of a high number of parents who both have and have not experienced ICs with their child and to then gather more in-depth information on the views expressed with a smaller number of parents whose children do have ICs to gain a greater insight into parent attitudes. A mixed methods approach was therefore used that incorporated both quantitative and qualitative methods of data collection.

According to Denscombe (2007), the mixed methods approach is 'problem-driven' in the sense that it treats the research problem, and more specifically the answers to the research questions, as the principal concern. As a result, researchers are prepared to use methods from different philosophical traditions in so far as their use produces findings that are of value for addressing the research problem. Mixed methods research therefore

challenges the premise that the different components of the research should be consistent in their underlying assumptions about the real world, fitting in with the pragmatist view of the current study.

Mixed methods research appears to have three advantages over single approach research: mixed methods research can (a) answer questions that other methodologies cannot; (b) provide stronger inferences; and (c) provide the opportunity for presenting a greater diversity of divergent views (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2003). Through using a sequential mixed methods approach in which data will be collected from questionnaires and then interviews, the accuracy of the findings will be increased (Denscombe, 2007). Through collecting both quantitative and qualitative data about parent attitudes, the research will be seen from different perspectives and a more complex overview of the subject will be formed. This is especially important in this research, given that the views of parents with regard to ICs are relatively unexplored. Deacon, Bryman and Fenton (1998) argue a major advantage of mixed methods research is that it allows for the design of a new study or phase in which further investigations can be made.

According to Denzin (1989), a mixed methods approach can reduce or compensate for methodological bias or weakness. Denzin (1978) suggested the need for 'methodological triangulation' in which the weakness of one method is offset by the strength of another method (Jick, 1979). This theory underlies the present research study. Through using a mixed methods design, the lack of in-depth information from the questionnaires is compensated for through the use of interviews, and the small sample size obtained through interviews can be compensated for through the use of questionnaires.

3.1.3 Research methods

For Phase 1 of this study, self-completion questionnaires were used. Self-completion questionnaires have a number of advantages. They are an efficient way of gathering information from a large sample, and they allow for anonymity which can encourage

frankness when sensitive issues are being explored (Gavin 2008; Tashakkroi & Teddlie, 2003). Gavin (2008) suggests that questionnaires are the favoured method for asking participants questions about their personal beliefs on a topic when they may not wish to discuss their beliefs in a public manner. For this study, phase one of the research invited parents to state their views and opinions about their children having ICs, based on their child either previously or currently having an IC or having never had one. The use of focus groups was considered, however some parents may have felt uncomfortable telling other parents that their child had an IC or sharing their views in front of other parents, and therefore questionnaires served this phase of the research well.

Furthermore, questionnaires were selected for phase one of data collection because they allow for a high number of responses to be collected, and provide useful insights into the relationships between a participant's beliefs and attitudes and demographic information, such as age, gender, ethnicity and religion (Gavin, 2008). Identifying such relationships was particularly relevant to this study in answering the research questions. By also presenting all respondents with the same standardised questions, it is possible to obtain a high reliability of response (Robson, 2002).

Following the questionnaire phase, importance was given to using a method of data collection that would elicit in-depth perspectives of parents who had experienced the phenomenon of ICs with their children. Interviews were selected as the most appropriate technique for eliciting these views. King (1994) suggests that a qualitative interview is most appropriate where a study focuses on the meaning of particular phenomena to the participants, and where a quantitative study has been carried out and qualitative data is required to validate particular measures or to clarify and illustrate the meaning of findings. Semi-structured interviews were selected based on: the flexibility of the technique for both the researcher and the interviewee (Searle, 1999; Willig, 2001), the idea that the researcher can follow the line of thinking of each interviewee (Searle, 1999), the fact that comparisons

can be made between the responses of each participant on the same general topics (Searle, 1999), and that the technique allows for in-depth information on a topic to be obtained (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2003). They also allow for the use of probing and additional questioning, which means that interesting responses from participants can be followed up, thus providing a richer insight into the phenomenon. As a result of the potential to follow up novel and interesting responses, semi-structured interviews were chosen as opposed to open-ended questionnaire items. Whilst questionnaires have the potential to uncover novel themes in parents' views, the use of interviews allowed for further exploration of views in a way that would not have been possible using questionnaires.

According to Kvale (1997), the qualitative interview is a powerful and sensitive tool for gaining the meaning and experience that something has within a person's everyday life. In general, hypotheses are not formulated in advance and as a result of this, interviews allow a certain openness towards what is being studied to be maintained.

3.2 Phase 1 – the IC questionnaire

3.2.1 Participants

For this phase of the study, the target population was parents of primary school aged children, including parents of children who have currently or previously had ICs and parents of children who do not have ICs. Parents were contacted through five state primary schools in an urban and multicultural north London borough. All five primary schools had nurseries and therefore the study incorporated parents of children aged between 3 and 11 years. Hoff (2004-2005) found that older children and adolescents often keep their imaginary friends a secret from their parents and it was therefore decided that it may cause anxiety to older children if parents of secondary school-aged children were also incorporated into the sample.

The borough used for this research maintains mixed faith and single faith schools (Church of England and Jewish). In order to ensure that participants came from a variety of religious faiths, both non-denominational and single faith schools were asked to participate in the research. The five schools which took part volunteered their participation and were selected as being generally representative of maintained schools within the borough, whose demographics include 43 non-denominational and 20 single faith schools (13 Church of England and 7 Jewish). Table 1a shows the demographics of the five schools included in the study and Table 1b shows the average demographics for mixed faith, Church of England, and Jewish schools in the borough.

Table 1a – School demographics for the schools included in this study

School	*Faith*	*No. of students*	*Free school meals*	*Children with EAL*
A	*Mixed*	*300*	*30%*	*29%*
B	*Mixed*	*311*	*43%*	*44%*
C	*Church of England*	*250*	*8%*	*13%*
D	*Church of England*	*280*	*10%*	*15%*
E	*Jewish*	*260*	*4%*	*6%*

Table 1b – Average school demographics for the borough

Faith	*Average no. of students*	*Average percentage of free school meals*	*Average percentage of children with EAL*
Mixed	*336*	*37%*	*33%*
Church of England	*265*	*9%*	*15%*
Jewish	*265*	*3%*	*7%*

As can be seen from the data presented, the schools included in this study were generally representative of mixed faith, Church of England, and Jewish schools within the

borough in terms of their size, the socio-economic status of pupils, and the potential cultural diversity of pupils.

Parents of children at the five primary schools were invited to take part in the research and they volunteered their views. For this initial 'questionnaire' phase, a self-selected sample was used (Searle, 1999) and parents volunteered their participation in response to reading about the study through explanatory letters given out in their child's school. Both mothers and fathers were invited to participate in the questionnaire, with emphasis placed on the importance of gaining the views of both genders.

3.2.2 Steps taken to increase the sample size and representation

Robson (2002) warns that a low response rate is a common problem with self-completion questionnaires and suggests that every effort should be made by the researcher to increase the response rate. A large number of questionnaires was disseminated through the five primary schools (1300 questionnaires were distributed with a response rate of 20% finally obtained). This 20% response rate is consistent with other survey-based studies undertaken over the past few years (e.g. see Baines & Blatchford, 2011). Follow-up letters were sent out to parents to encourage those who had not responded by the given date to do so, and the need for fathers to participate was again emphasised. For ease as well as confidentiality, all parents were provided with envelopes to place the completed questionnaires into, and were given the option of handing the sealed envelope to the school office or asking their child to hand it to their class teacher. It was hoped that these were both convenient means for parents to return questionnaires. For one school, questionnaires were placed on the school's Virtual Learning Environment and parents were asked to log-on and complete the questionnaire via the school's weekly newsletter. This method did not see an increase in response rate. In the case of all schools, a letter explaining the research accompanied the questionnaire and parents were also informed of the research via the school newsletter to promote interest, with questionnaires being sent out the day after the

newsletter to encourage participation. Adverts were also placed on "Mumsnet" and "Netmums" online forums requesting the participation of parents for the research. Three mothers responded to this advert but none of these mothers actually returned the questionnaire. It was hoped that by approaching parents from both mixed and single faith schools, a culturally diverse population would be obtained. Robson (2011) recommends that for effective coding of open ended questions, "a survey should be based on a substantial, representative sample (say 50 responses)" (p.267).

Robson (2002) suggests that those who choose not to participate in research may well have different views from those who do choose to. This is of particular importance when considering the present study and the limited response of parents who were not White British or from religious and ethnic minorities (see Table 2). It is felt that these responses would have given further insight into the views of mothers and fathers from different cultures and thus affects the generalisability of the results.

3.2.3 The Study Sample

Of the 259 parents who participated in completing the questionnaire, 63 were parents responding based on their child currently or previously having an IC ("IC Parents") and 196 were parents responding based on their child never having had an IC ("NIC Parents"). Table 2 shows the study's sample for phase one according to parent gender, ethnicity, religion and time resided in UK.

Table 2 – Characteristics of the sample population

	Gender		Ethnicity		Religion			UK Resident	
	Mother	**Father**	**White British**	**Other**	**Christian**	**Jewish**	**Other**	**Always**	**Not Always**
IC Parents (n=63)	86%	14%	83%	17%	67%	22%	11%	82%	18%
NIC parents (n=196)	89%	11%	79%	21%	60%	26%	14%	84%	16%
Overall Total (n=259)	88%	12%	79%	21%	65%	25%	10%	83%	17%

Overall, the majority of participants were mothers who were White British. Whilst there was a representation of other religions, Christians were most highly represented. The majority of parents had also resided in the UK for all their life. Table 3 shows the sample of children to whom parents made reference in their questionnaires.

Table 3 – Characteristics of the children talked about by parents

	Gender		Ethnicity		UK Resident		Position in Family			
	Girl	**Boy**	**White British**	**Other**	**Always**	**Not Always**	**Only Child**	**Eldest Child**	**Middle Child**	**Youngest Child**
IC Parents (n=63)	56%	44%	82%	18%	97%	3%	29%	35%	5%	31%
NIC parents (n=196)	38%	62%	80%	20%	97%	3%	17%	45%	9%	29%
Overall Total (n=259)	42%	58%	80%	20%	97%	3%	20%	42%	8%	30%

A series of chi-square tests were conducted to examine the comparability of the sample population in the IC and NIC groups. There were no significant differences between

gender, religion, ethnicity or length of time resided in the UK for the parents in each group, and no significant differences between the ethnicity, time resided in the UK or position in the family for the children talked about in each group. A chi-square test however indicated a significant difference for child gender between groups, $X^2(1, N=259)=6.198, p<0.05,$ with girls more highly represented in the IC group and boys more highly represented in the NIC group.

3.2.4 Questionnaire construction and procedure

3.2.4.1 Constructing the questionnaire

As a result of no previous test materials for looking at parents' views of ICs being available, the researcher chose to develop their own questionnaire. When constructing a questionnaire, Johnson and Christensen (2000) outline thirteen principles of questionnaire construction (Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2003). These principles were followed when designing the questionnaire, which included ensuring that the items fulfilled the research objectives, avoiding 'leading' or 'loaded' questions, using mutually exclusive and exhaustive response categories for closed-ended questions, and ensuring that the questionnaire is easy for the participant to understand and complete. A table summarising all the key principles can be found in Appendix B.

A questionnaire was developed which included a mixture of closed and open-ended questions to elicit the views of parents. The closed questions had been developed through the process of analysing previous findings from literature and were designed to produce standardised answers and data that could be easily quantified and compared across participants (Gavin, 2008). Whilst the majority of the questionnaire was made up of closed questions to ensure that views could be easily quantified, open-ended questions were used to gain more in-depth views of parents. Open-ended questions sought more in-depth views regarding the advantages and disadvantages parents perceived for a child having an IC, as well as the concerns they would feel. Parents were also invited to provide any further

comments regarding their views on ICs via an open-ended question. It was felt that these open-ended questions elicited views that may have been missed had only closed questions been used. Tashakkori and Teddlie (2003) also suggest that open-ended questionnaire items ensure that information provided by participants is not constrained by any preconceptions held by the researcher.

Despite the many benefits cited, self-completion questionnaires can however be subject to response bias; for example, in this study they may have excluded parents whose first language is not English and for whom the language of the questionnaire was not accessible. Consideration was given to the questionnaire being translated into the dominant languages of the school populations; however after careful consideration with research supervisors it was felt that there were over-riding ethical issues with regard to this, such as the researcher not knowing whether the questions had been translated correctly or kept their meaning in translation, as well as the practical issue of expense.

The questionnaire was developed in three sections; the first sought the views of parents whose children had never had an IC, the second sought the views of parents whose children currently or previously had an IC, and the third sought factual information about the parent and child, including the gender, ethnicity, religion and profession of the parent, and the gender, age, ethnicity and position in the family of the child being discussed. In both section one and two of the questionnaire, initial questionnaire items were descriptive, including whether the parent remembered having an IC as a child and whether they had previous experience of ICs with another child. In section one for parents of children with ICs, information about the ICs such as the number of ICs their child has created and the form of the IC, as well as the age at which the IC disappeared if applicable, was sought. Parents with children with ICs expressed a desire to provide information on them during the pilot phase of the questionnaire and that is why the questionnaire was divided into separate sections for IC and NIC parents to complete. The remaining items in both sections sought the opinions of

parents regarding their children having ICs (see Appendix C for an example of the questionnaire).

The opinions of parents were sought using scaled questions. Parents were asked the extent to which they felt there were advantages and disadvantages for their child having an IC, where 1 = “distinct advantages” and 7 = “distinct disadvantages”. They were also asked the extent to which they felt concerned about their child having an IC, where 1 = “not at all concerned” and 7 = “highly concerned”. Parents were also asked to rate a number of statements about their attitudes to their child having an IC, including their encouragement of it, their level of involvement, the appropriateness of the play in different contexts and their embarrassment with regard to it. For these statements, parents rated them as “Never”, “Sometimes”, “Often” or “Always” applicable to them. Given that parents in the IC Parent group may have been responding based on their child’s IC having disappeared and their views therefore being with regard to the child having the IC at the age when it was present in the child’s life, age was introduced as a dependent variable in this study as opposed to an independent variable. Parents were therefore presented with a range of different developmental stages in a child’s life, and were asked to rate the extent to which they would mind their child engaging with an IC at that stage where 1 = “not at all” and 5 = “very much”. Scales are a commonly used method for measuring attitudes. Items in a scale can look interesting to participants, and respondents have been found to often enjoy completing scales of this type (Robson, 2002). Such a systematic technique helps to ensure internal consistency and allows for comparison among participants (Robson, 2002).

Teddlie and Tashakkori (2003) warn that questionnaires must be kept short in order for participants to engage with them. This was a particular concern when designing the questionnaire given that parents have little free time to complete lengthy surveys. Efforts were made to ensure that the questionnaire fully covered the research questions being investigated and provided opportunities for parents to elaborate their views whilst striving

to keep completion time to under fifteen minutes. This particular concern was addressed during the pilot phase of the questionnaire.

It is also important to note that the term "imaginary friend" was adopted in the questionnaire instead of "imaginary companion" as it was felt to be more commonly used by parents. Parents were also provided with a definition of "imaginary friends" at the start of the questionnaire to support their understanding of the study.

3.2.4.2 Pilot Study

Robson (2011) recommends a two-stage process of pre-testing a questionnaire before administration. The content of the questionnaire was informally pre-tested on colleagues who were asked to provide feedback on the clarity of the questions. Following this, the questionnaire was piloted on two parents of primary school children with ICs and two parents of primary school aged children without ICs. This allowed for the researcher to gain an understanding of the meaning of the questions to respondents, how they arrived at their responses, and the length of time the questionnaire took to complete. Respondents were also asked to provide feedback on the accessibility of the questionnaire and the language used, and their understanding of the explanation letter. Following this, appropriate amendments were made to the explanation letter and questionnaire. This stage also allowed the researcher to test whether the questionnaire elicited the views required to fulfil the research aims and questions. By engaging in this process, it was intended that the final questionnaire would be brief enough to encourage parents to participate, would only include questions that were targeted at important issues identified in the literature review, and would be suited to the target population (Denscombe, 2007; Robson, 2011).

A further pilot stage was used to provide an indication of the response rate that could be expected from participants. Questionnaires were sent out to parents of pupils via one mixed faith state primary school in a London borough and a response rate of 20% was

achieved. It was therefore decided that a high number of questionnaires would be distributed in the hope of achieving an adequate response rate, as well as adverts for participants on 'Netmums' and 'Mumsnet' online forums being placed.

3.2.4.3 Procedure

Following the pilot stage and the reformulation of the questionnaire, individual survey packs were made up comprising of a letter of explanation about the research, participation and methods for returning the questionnaire (see Appendix C), as well as the questionnaire itself. These were all placed in a large white envelope which the completed questionnaire could then be placed into and anonymously, confidentially and securely returned to the school office or class teacher for the researcher to collect. The researcher hand-delivered all questionnaires to each individual class in each primary school and personally asked the class teacher to give the questionnaire packs to each child. The researcher ensured that there were enough packs for each child to take a questionnaire home. The researcher also asked the class teacher to collect any returned questionnaires and hand them into the school office for collection. Parents who wished to participate in the research completed and returned the questionnaire.

3.2.5 Data Analysis

A mixed-methods analysis was used for interpreting the data collected from this study. Closed questions were analysed using the computerised statistical programme SPSS 20 and open-ended questions were analysed using thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

Responses to closed questions were coded using numbers to allow for data input and analysis in SPSS; for example where parents were asked to rate statements using "Never", "Sometimes", "Often" or "Always", responses were coded as 1 = "Never", 2 = "Sometimes", 3 = "Often" and 4 = "Always".

The main independent variables were: whether the child had an IC, parent gender, child gender, parent religion, parent having an IC when they were younger, and previous experience of ICs with another child (independent variables). Mean responses to each dependent variable according to these independent variables were established as well as the effects of each independent variable upon the attitudes of the parents using ANOVAs. Open-ended questions from the questionnaire were analysed thematically, in which themes regarding parent views were identified. Thematic analysis was also used to analyse the responses given by participants during interview and the process is therefore discussed in full in the data analysis section for Phase 2.

3.3 Phase 2 interviews

3.3.1 Sampling and Participants

Of the parents who consented to be interviewed for phase two, 12 mothers whose children previously or currently had ICs were selected. Careful consideration was given to whether to also interview parents who had not experienced ICs with their children and to perform a further comparison of views; however it was decided that such a comparison would not serve to provide greater insight into parent views of ICs or fulfil the aims of the research. Through eliciting the views of parents whose children did not have ICs in the questionnaire phase, it was felt that enough insight into these views was gained to successfully understand the views of parents and what affects these views, and that it would be of greater benefit to explore the views of parents who had experienced ICs with their own children. This was also in part based upon a number of parents in the NIC group stating in response to open-ended questions in the questionnaire that it was difficult to elaborate upon their views because they had not experienced it with their child.

No fathers consented to be interviewed and mothers were selected using purposive sampling to ensure a variety of parent religion, child gender, and IC form, to successfully

answer the research questions and to get a range of perspectives. Of the mothers selected, all were White British except one who was Afro-Caribbean. This was the only mother who consented to be interviewed from an ethnicity other than White British. Table 4 shows the characteristics of the mothers interviewed according to ethnicity, religion, child gender and child age.

Table 4 – Characteristics of the mothers interviewed

Parent	Ethnicity	Religion	Child gender	Child age
ET	White British	Christian	Male	8
EW	White British	Christian	Female	3
EB	White British	Church of England	Male	3
NR	White British	Jewish	Female	4
SF	White British	Church of England	Female	5
JC	White British	Jewish	Male	4.5
LD	White British	Church of England	Male	5.5
SK	White British	Jewish	Female	9
SE	White British	Christian	Female	5
JD	White British	Christian	Male	5
SA	Afro-Caribbean	Church of England	Male	5
LW	White British	Jewish	Female	3.5

3.3.2 Constructing the interview schedule and procedure

The interview was designed to elicit the views and experiences of parents who had experienced ICs with their children. The questions included in the interview schedule for the present study were pre-determined and open-ended, based upon the study's research questions, existing literature reviewed in Chapter 1, views expressed by parents during the

phase one questionnaire, and the feedback provided by parents during the pilot-phase of interview. The schedule began with descriptive and non-intrusive questions about their children's ICs in order to put interviewees at ease. Following this, more sensitive issues were approached which included the concerns that parents felt about their children's ICs, the advantages and disadvantages they felt ICs had for them and their children, their engagement with their child's IC behaviour, and their views with regard to their children having ICs in late childhood and beyond. Prompts inviting interviewees to elaborate upon views were provided to help elicit rich contextual data whilst remaining non-directive, in the hope of further understanding the views and experiences of parents with regard to their children's engagement with ICs (Smith, 2003). See Appendix D for the interview schedule.

3.3.2.1 Pilot Study

In order to ensure that the interview questions elicited in-depth views of parents, the schedule was piloted with two mothers who were then asked the following questions: (a) Did you feel that the questions asked were relevant to your views and experiences of ICs? (b) Were you able to understand all language and terms used? Could the interview be improved by rephrasing any of the questions? (c) Did the style and nature of the interview and questions allow you to feel at ease to express your views? (d) Can you think of any areas with regard to the topic area that were not covered during interview that you feel would be of interest to the study? (e) Are there any further comments that you have regarding the interview process and the questions asked that would be useful for exploring the views and experiences of parents regarding their children's ICs? From the feedback provided during the pilot phase, a number of amendments were made to the interview schedule to ensure that questions were fully accessible to parents and elicited rich information.

3.3.2.2 Conducting the interviews

The purpose and format of the interview was explained to participants. They were informed that the interview sought their experiences and views with regard to their child having an IC, and that they would be asked a series of questions in an informal and conversational manner. It was explained that the interview would remain confidential and that they could withdraw participation at any time. Following this, participants provided written consent to be interviewed and verbal permission for the interviews to be audio-taped (see Appendix D for the example explanation and consent letter). Participants were then asked if they had any questions for the interviewer, and were informed that they could contact the researcher should they seek any further information at a later stage.

As stated the content of the interview was prepared in advance to include a set of questions, probes and prompts, and a proposed sequence for the questions. Freedom was given to the sequence in which topics were covered and questions were asked, the exact wording of the questions, and the time and attention given to each topic (Robson, 2002). The researcher was guided by the interviewees' responses to topics, and subsequent topics were approached based on these responses so that the interview flowed in a logical manner.

At the end of the interview, participants were asked if they had any further views or information they wished to add, and were asked whether they would like to receive a summary of the research findings after completion.

When carrying out qualitative research, importance should be placed upon the reflexivity of the researcher. Willig (2001) suggests that reflexivity requires an awareness of the researcher's contribution to the construction of meanings throughout the research process. Nightingale and Cromby (1999) suggest that reflexivity encourages us to *"explore the ways in which a researcher's involvement with a particular study influences, acts upon and informs such research"* (p.228) I have engaged in reflexive discussions in supervision

with my research tutors and during peer supervision in order to ensure that my own personal views and aims do not influence the research.

3.3.4 Data Analysis

The data from both the open-ended questionnaire items and the semi-structured interviews were analysed using thematic analysis (as described by Braun & Clarke, 2006). Interviews were recorded using an audio-tape and transcribed verbatim. Thematic analysis was selected as the most appropriate approach as it allows for qualitative data to be encoded using a systematic process (Boyatzis, 1998) that allows flexibility to enable a rich, detailed and complex account of the data to be established and themes to be abstracted across an entire data set (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis was chosen over other qualitative data analysis approaches, such as Interpretive Phenomenological Analysis (IPA) because the focus of this study was on identifying themes across the responses of parents who had experienced ICs with their children as opposed to seeking individual differences between parents' responses (Willig, 2003). Furthermore, given that the views of parents regarding their children's ICs are relatively unexplored, it was decided that an initial surface level analysis was needed before a more in-depth and interpretative analysis could be carried out.

Braun and Clarke (2006) outline six phases of thematic analysis, which were followed when conducting the analysis of the data transcripts for the present study.

Table 5 – Process of Thematic Analysis

Phase in thematic analysis	**Description of the process used**
1. Familiarisation with the data	• Each interview was transcribed verbatim. • Interview transcripts were read and notes were made regarding prominent themes that emerged across the interviews.
2. Generation of initial codes	• This began once I became familiar with the data set and an initial list of ideas about what I thought was emerging from the data set was made.

	• Each interview was reviewed in turn and parts of the data that appeared to be interesting in response to the research questions and in offering additional insight into parent attitudes towards ICs were highlighted. An inductive approach to the data was used, whilst keeping in mind the theory that had contributed to the development of the interview schedule. • These extracts were then 'coded' and codes were written in the margins of the transcripts. According to Braun and Clarke, codes represent "units of meaningful text" and are different to 'themes' which are broader and developed in the next phase. • Extracts that related to the same code were then grouped together and the frequency of single codes was noted. I coded for as many potential themes or patterns as possible due to not knowing what might be useful and relevant in the end. • I strived to include the context around the extracts in order to assist the formation of themes, as recommended by Braun and Clarke. • Codes were then discussed and checked with my supervisors to ensure corroboration with regard to the meaning assigned to the data. Changes were made to codes, such as similar codes being grouped together where the meaning remained the same, until it was deemed that they were representative of the entire data set.
3. Search for themes	• The search for themes began once all the interviews had been coded and a list of codes produced. • Consideration was given to how different codes may combine to form a sub-theme and how sub-themes may combine to form an overarching theme, whilst also considering their consistency with the research questions and aims.
4. Review themes	• The original transcripts were revisited to ensure that the themes captured the information provided. • The quotes from which the codes and themes were developed were also revisited and themes were in some cases refined. • Themes and related codes were also checked by supervisors to ensure corroboration, and discussions were held in which some themes were amended.
5. Define and name themes	• The names of themes were developed that were an accurate reflection of the data and an appropriate response to the research questions and aims. • With the support of supervisors, theme names were developed that ensured the reader understood the nature of what was being represented without having to do further exploration of codes.
6. Produce the report	• Chapter 4 outlines the themes that emerged from the data. For each code, just one quote is presented in Chapter 4 as a result of limited word count.

To ensure validity of the data analysis and formation of themes from the questionnaire and interview data, codes and themes were scrutinised and repeatedly checked in collaboration with supervisors.

3.3.5 Trustworthiness and Generalisation

Robson (2002) argues that for research to be trustworthy, it must have internal and external validity. The main aim of the study was to investigate parent views of ICs, and the data collected and reported was direct to parent views and focussed only on their views of ICs. Questionnaires were developed in accordance with the reviewed literature, and the pilot phase ensured that questions were clear, direct and elicited information appropriate to the aims of the research. All parents from the five schools included in the study volunteered their views and all responses were included in the study.

Lincoln and Guba (1985) also argue that credibility, or internal validity, is the most important factor in ensuring trustworthiness in research. Shenton (2004) highlights a number of key elements to ensuring credibility of qualitative data, including the adoption of well-established research methods, triangulation, tactics to help ensure honesty in participants, iterative questioning, frequent discussion of findings in supervision, and peer scrutiny of the research project. In the interview phase, I ensured that I was sensitive in my approach to the subject and that I took time to develop rapport with participants. I encouraged participants to provide honest accounts of their views and experiences through the process of the interview and the line of questioning used. I ensured that participants felt at ease to express their views, and did not feel challenged or embarrassed to do so. I used iterative questioning to ensure that questions were being answered honestly, and probing to help participants to elaborate upon their views and to recognise that what they were saying was of interest and importance. I also provided explicit written and verbal explanations as to the purpose of the research and how the data would be used. As previously mentioned, I

ensured credibility of data analysis through discussions during supervision and through peer consultation groups.

Robson (2002) also highlights the need for methodological triangulation, and the use of questionnaires and interviews in this study meant that this occurred. Furthermore, elaborations and inconsistencies in the data collected from single participants could be identified between the two methods. In addition, throughout this methodology section, the research design and its implementation, the methods and process of data collection, any restrictions upon data collection and the type of people who contributed, and the researcher's attempts to engage in reflexive practice have been made explicit to ensure that the study can be replicated and is transferable and dependable (Shenton, 2004).

LeCompte and Goetz (1982) emphasise the importance of external validity and the generalisability of findings, as well as recognising any limitations upon the generalisability of a research study. This study used random sampling of participants in phase 1 and throughout captured a range of views from a heterogeneous sample of different religions and parents of children of varying ages. Whilst it was hoped that a range of ethnic groups and the views of mothers and fathers would be captured, the majority of parents were White British mothers, which impacts on the generalisability of the findings. A high number of parent responses were however collected during Phase 1 of the study, and the potential to generalise these findings is further considered in Section 5.3.1 of Chapter 5.

Furthermore, this explorative study developed general statements and hypotheses which can be tested for generality in following studies. The generalizability of findings from this research could be further confirmed through replication of the study and empirical testing of the hypotheses formed (Mayring, 2007).

3.3.6 Ethical Considerations

The design and methodology that I have chosen for this study adhere to the BPS Code of Ethics and Conduct (2009) and the research was agreed by the ethics committee at the Institute of Education (see Appendix E).

Chapter 4 – Results

This chapter outlines the key results from Phase 1 and Phase 2 of the study separately. The results from the phase 1 questionnaire will be presented first, with the key findings and significant results being outlined. The results from the phase 2 interview will then be presented, with key themes being outlined. These key findings from Phase 1 and Phase 2 of the study will then be discussed in detail in the next chapter.

4.1 Phase 1 Results

The views of parents regarding their children having ICs were established by gaining the mean ratings for all the attitudes examined according to the child having an IC, parent gender, child gender, parent religion, the parent having an IC when younger, and the parent having previous experience of ICs with another child. These mean ratings are can be found in Tables 6, 7 and 8 below.

In order to analyse the effect of the independent variables upon the views of parents, ideally all independent variables would be included in one analysis of variance (ANOVA). This would reduce the familywise error rate or type I errors by reducing the number of statistical tests that would need to be run on each variable and the likelihood of a significant effect occurring by chance. The small sample sizes within certain groups of the variables parent gender, parent religion and parent having previous experience of ICs with other children however prevented this. For these variables, two-way ANOVAs were the largest tests that could be conducted and were used in order to maximise the sample size within each level of the independent variable. To reduce the type I errors as far as possible, a three-way ANOVA was conducted on the variables 'child having an IC', 'child gender' and 'parent having an IC when younger' and a series of two-way ANOVAs were conducted in relation to the other variables, with significant main effects and interactions noted. Where the interaction between two variables was not of interest to this study or would not have added anything to the research, two-way ANOVAs were not conducted. Prior to analysis, all

dependent variables were tested for skewness and kurtosis, and where the responses to the dependent variables were skewed or kurtotic, Kruskall-Wallis non-parametric analyses were conducted instead. The key findings from the analyses of variance are presented below for each independent variable.

Table 6 – Means for dependent variables according to each independent variable

		Extent advantages/ disadvantages		Extent concerned		Encourage child to play with IC		Discourage child from play with IC		Ignore child playing with IC		Mind child playing with IC in front of other parents and adults	
		Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
IC	Yes	2.73	1.405	1.68	1.255	2.00	1.032	1.06	0.246	1.59	0.775	1.10	0.298
	No	4.11	1.285	3.58	1.942	1.63	0.702	1.88	0.922	1.94	0.869	1.94	1.009
	Total	3.77	1.44	3.12	1.973	1.72	0.809	1.68	0.883	1.85	0.859	1.73	0.959
Parent Gender	**Mother**	3.76	1.417	3.12	1.956	1.72	0.804	1.70	0.897	1.86	0.866	1.74	0.966
	Father	3.90	1.626	3.06	2.128	1.74	0.855	1.52	0.769	1.84	0.820	1.65	0.915
	Total	3.77	1.440	3.12	1.973	1.72	0.809	1.68	0.883	1.85	0.859	1.73	0.959
Child Gender	**Girl**	3.61	1.333	2.80	1.750	1.73	0.849	1.58	0.775	1.79	0.801	1.64	0.901
	Boy	3.90	1.507	3.35	2.095	1.72	0.781	1.75	0.951	1.91	0.899	1.80	0.997
	Total	3.77	1.440	3.12	1.973	1.72	0.809	1.68	0.883	1.85	0.859	1.73	0.959
Parent Religion	**Christian**	3.85	1.418	3.25	2.059	1.77	0.823	1.68	0.919	1.82	0.870	1.75	1.020
	Jewish	3.41	1.341	2.73	1.659	1.73	0.784	1.64	0.713	2.02	0.820	1.83	0.775
	Other	4.16	1.818	3.24	2.166	1.48	0.872	1.80	1.080	2.00	1.000	1.52	1.046
	Total	3.77	1.458	3.12	1.984	1.73	0.820	1.69	0.888	1.89	0.873	1.75	0.968
Parent IC when younger	**Yes**	2.82	1.373	1.71	1.228	2.31	1.030	1.23	0.427	1.82	0.756	1.33	0.530
	No	3.94	1.391	3.36	1.982	1.62	0.717	1.76	0.921	1.86	0.880	1.81	1.003
	Total	3.77	1.443	3.11	1.976	1.73	0.809	1.68	0.884	1.85	0.861	1.73	0.960
Parent previous experience of IC with another child	**Yes**	3.00	1.555	1.81	1.650	2.00	1.020	1.23	0.514	1.73	0.604	1.40	0.645
	No	4.02	1.302	3.53	1.929	1.62	0.710	1.79	0.868	1.93	0.893	1.80	0.963
	Total	3.89	1.372	3.31	1.977	1.67	0.763	1.72	0.851	1.90	0.863	1.75	0.938

N.B. Significant differences of the independent variable at sig level 0.05 are denoted by a blue cell.

Table 6 shows the mean ratings for each of the first six dependent variables measured at each level of independent variable. As can be seen by the cells highlighted in blue, there were some significant main effects of the child having an IC, parent religion, the parent having had an IC when they were younger and previous experience of an IC with another child. These significant results are discussed in greater detail in sections 4.1.1 – 4.1.4.

4.1.1 The extent to which parents felt there were/would be advantages and disadvantages for their child having an IC

In general, parents felt that there were both advantages and disadvantages for their child having an IC (see Table 6). The sequence of three-way and two-way ANOVAs identified significant main effects of child having an IC, *F(1,249)=20.602, p<0.001 (η^2= 0.077),* and parent having an IC when younger, *F(1,249)=6.696, p<0.01 (η^2= 0.026).* Parents whose children currently or previously had an IC and parents who had an IC when younger felt there were more advantages for their child than parents whose children did not have an IC and parents who did not have an IC when younger (see Table 6). For these significant effects, 7.7% of the variance is explained by the child having an IC whereas only 2.6% of the variance is explained by the parent having an IC when younger, indicating that the child having an IC has a greater effect upon the extent that parents feel there are advantages and disadvantages for the child.

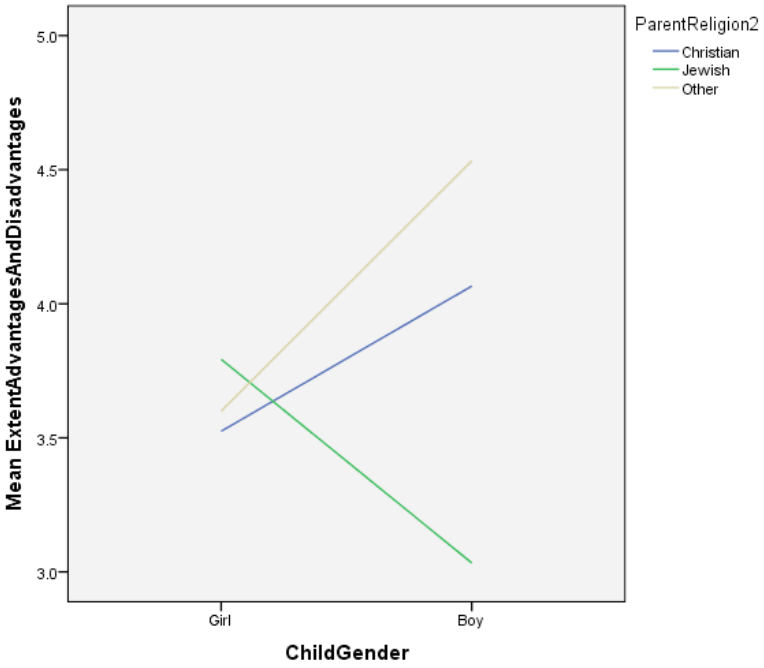
There was also a significant main effect of parent religion, *F(2,230)=4.098, p<0.05 (η^2= 0.034).* Post hoc comparisons using the Tukey HSD test indicated a significant difference between Jewish and Other parents. Jewish parents felt there were more advantages for their child than parents who were not Christian or Jewish. There were no significant main effects of parent gender, child gender and parent having previous experience of ICs with another child. There was however a significant interaction between child gender and parent religion, *F(2,230)=5.204, p<0.01 (η^2= 0.043).* One-way ANOVAs were conducted to examine the nature of this interaction. There was no significant effect of parent religion on the extent that parents felt there were advantages and disadvantages for girls, but there was a significant effect of parent religion for boys, *F(2,133)=7.014, p<0.001 (η^2= 0.095)* (see Table 9). Post hoc comparisons using the Tukey HSD test indicated a significant difference between Jewish and Christian parents for boys, and Jewish and Other parents for boys. Jewish parents

felt there were more advantages for their sons than Christian parents and parents from other religions (see Graph 1).

Table 9 – Means for child gender x parent religion

		Child Gender			
		Girl		Boy	
		Mean	SD	Mean	SD
Parent Religion	Christian	3.52	1.30	4.07	1.46
	Jewish	3.79	1.29	3.03	1.30
	Other	3.60	1.51	4.53	1.96

Graph 1 – Interaction between Child Gender and Parent Religion



When asked in open ended questions on the questionnaire about what they felt were the advantages and disadvantages for their child, NIC parents stated more disadvantages than IC parents with the key disadvantage being a negative impact on the development of real life friends. NIC parents also stated that they felt the IC would challenge parental control. In contrast, IC parents stated very few disadvantages, with the most common one felt to be the IC being used as a scapegoat. NIC parents again stated fewer

advantages for their child than IC parents, with the most commonly stated advantage being the IC supporting emotional development, including providing emotional support, being a coping mechanism, and boosting self-esteem and confidence. NIC parents also felt that an advantage of the IC was that it provided the child with companionship and an alternative to adult company. IC parents felt there to be many advantages for their child, including supporting the social and emotional development of the child through supporting emotional expression, providing comfort for the child, supporting the development of social skills, and helping the child to develop empathy. These parents also felt that an advantage for their child was that the IC provided companionship and play opportunities, and supported the development of imagination and creativity (see Appendix F for example responses from parents).

4.1.2 The extent to which parents felt/would feel concerned about their child having an IC

In general, parents felt some concern about their child having an IC (see Table 6). The sequence of three-way and two-way ANOVAs identified significant main effects of child having an IC, $F(1,249)=16.111$, $p<0.001$ ($\eta^2= 0.061$), parent having an IC when younger, $F(1,249)=22.147$, $p<0.01$ ($\eta^2= 0.028$), and parent having previous experience of ICs with another child, $F(1,204)=6.295$, $p<0.05$ ($\eta^2= 0.030$). Parents whose children currently or previously had an IC, parents who had an IC when younger, and parents who had previous experience of ICs with other children all felt less concerned than parents who did not have this experience of ICs (see Table 6). There were no significant main effects of parent gender, child gender or parent religion.

When asked in open ended questions on the questionnaire about their concerns, NIC parents stated many more concerns than IC parents, with the key one being that the IC is a sign that the child is experiencing social and emotional difficulties including loneliness, a lack of real life friends and emotional distress. A further concern expressed by NIC parents was the impact that the IC would have on the child's real life peer relationships with the

main concern being a negative impact on the development of real life friends and the negative perceptions of peers that could lead to bullying and teasing for the child. NIC parents were also concerned that the IC would challenge their control as a parent, and that it was a sign of significant/mental health difficulties. NIC parents also stated that many of their concerns would be conditional upon the child's age, the role of the IC and the child's pre-occupation with it. The age of the child was a key concern stated by the NIC parents. In contrast, IC parents stated very few concerns. The key concern was the child's age and the IC continuing as the child gets older, which parents felt might lead to some bullying or teasing by peers. Other than that, parents stated that they had no concerns as a result of the child having a good social life and no negative impact upon the child or their development of real life friends (see appendix F for example responses from parents).

Parents in the IC group only were asked, if they had experienced concern about their child having an IC, how they had acted upon these concerns. Of the parents who had experienced concern (n = 23), 33% had talked to their partner about their concerns, 44% had talked to their family and friends, 26% had talked to other parents, 37% had talked to their child about their IC, 11% had talked to their child about their concerns, 19% had read research about ICs on the internet or in books, and 11% had talked to their child's teacher or school. No parents stated that they looked on internet forums when they had concerns about their child's ICs.

4.1.3 Parent encourages/would encourage child to play with their IC

In general, parents reported they would rarely encourage their child to engage with their IC (see Table 6). The sequence of three-way and two-way ANOVAs identified significant main effects of child having an IC, $F(1,248)=5.903$, $p<0.05$ ($\eta^2= 0.023$), parent having an IC when younger, $F(1,248)=18.038$, $p<0.001$ ($\eta^2= 0.068$), and parent having previous experience of ICs with another child, $F(1,203)=4.198$, $p<0.05$ ($\eta^2= 0.020$). For these

significant effects, 6.8% of the variance is explained by the parent having an IC when younger whereas only 2.3% is explained by the child having an IC and 2% by the parent having previous experience of ICs with other children. This indicates that the parent having an IC when they were younger has a greater effect upon the extent that parents would encourage their child to engage with their IC. Parents whose children currently or previously had an IC, parents who had ICs when they were younger and parents who had previous experience of ICs with another child would all encourage their child to play with their IC more than parents without such experience of ICs (see Table 6). There were no significant main effects of parent gender, child gender or parent religion.

4.1.4 Parent feelings and behaviour towards ICs, and their relation to social context

A number of questions were asked to understand parents' discouragement or ignoring of ICs, and their views in relation to social context. In general, parents would rarely discourage or ignore their child interacting with their IC. They would not mind their child engaging with their IC in front of other parents and adults (see Table 6), and they would rarely get embarrassed if their child played with their IC in front of other parents or children (see Table 7).

The sequence of three-way and two-way ANOVAs in relation to these variables identified a significant main effect of child having an IC for whether the parent would discourage their child from playing with their IC $F(1,245)=16.510, p<0.001 (\eta^2=0.063)$ and whether the parent ignores/would ignore their child playing with their IC, $F(1,246)=7.258, p<0.01 (\eta^2=0.029)$. This significant main effect was also identified for whether the parent minds/would mind their child playing with their IC in front of other parents and adults, $F(1,244)=14.924, p<0.001 (\eta^2=0.058)$, and whether the parent gets/would get embarrassed if their child played with their IC in front of other parents, $F(1,244)=9.036, p<0.01 (\eta^2=0.036)$, and other children, $F(1,244)=9.292, p<0.01 (\eta^2=0.037)$. Parents whose children currently or

previously had an IC would be less likely to discourage their child from playing with their IC, less likely to ignore their child playing with their IC, would mind their child playing with their IC in front of other parents or adults less, and would be less likely to get embarrassed if their child played with their IC in front of other parents, adults or children than parents whose children did not have an IC (see Tables 6 and 7). There were no significant main effects of parent gender, child gender, parent religion, parent having an IC when younger, or parent having previous experience of ICs with another child.

Table 7 – Means for dependent variables according to each independent variable

		Get embarrassed when child plays IC in front of other parents		Get embarrassed when child plays with IC in front of other children		Mind my child playing with IC at school		Mind child playing with IC at a friend's house		Parent join in with the pretense of IC e.g. by setting a place at the table		Parent join in with pretense of IC privately at home		Parent join in with pretense when in public	
		Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
IC	**Yes**	1.08	0.277	1.13	0.386	1.42	0.770	1.38	0.768	1.98	0.948	2.40	0.976	2.18	1.008
	No	1.74	0.956	1.71	0.873	2.31	0.965	2.28	1.008	1.78	0.707	1.97	0.769	1.70	0.714
	Total	1.58	0.890	1.57	0.821	2.10	0.995	2.07	1.029	1.83	0.774	2.08	0.844	1.82	0.820
Parent Gender	**Mother**	1.61	0.910	1.58	0.835	2.13	1.007	2.11	1.052	1.86	0.792	2.11	0.844	1.84	0.826
	Father	1.42	0.720	1.48	0.724	1.87	0.885	1.77	0.805	1.57	0.568	1.84	0.820	1.61	0.761
	Total	1.58	0.890	1.57	0.821	2.10	0.995	2.07	1.029	1.83	0.774	2.08	0.844	1.82	0.820
Child Gender	**Girl**	1.50	0.815	1.49	0.791	1.95	0.951	1.93	1.011	1.88	0.821	2.17	0.902	1.88	0.912
	Boy	1.65	0.939	1.63	0.841	2.21	1.016	2.18	1.032	1.79	0.738	2.01	0.795	1.77	0.745
	Total	1.58	0.890	1.57	0.821	2.10	0.995	2.07	1.029	1.83	0.774	2.08	0.844	1.82	0.820
Parent Religion	**Christian**	1.56	0.861	1.54	0.798	2.03	1.016	1.95	1.029	1.89	0.764	2.13	0.872	1.91	0.893
	Jewish	1.74	0.909	1.72	0.833	2.34	0.890	2.36	0.931	1.66	0.734	2.08	0.726	1.69	0.654
	Other	1.44	1.003	1.44	0.917	2.00	1.080	2.12	1.166	1.60	0.866	1.64	0.907	1.54	0.779
	Total	1.59	0.890	1.57	0.822	2.11	0.998	2.07	1.032	1.80	0.774	2.07	0.851	1.81	0.835
Parent IC when younger	**Girl**	1.21	0.469	1.23	0.536	1.81	0.811	1.76	0.925	2.21	0.935	2.49	0.885	2.15	0.961
	Boy	1.66	0.932	1.63	0.851	2.15	1.019	2.13	1.041	1.76	0.725	2.00	0.818	1.75	0.778
	Total	1.59	0.891	1.57	0.822	2.10	0.997	2.07	1.031	1.82	0.775	2.08	0.846	1.82	0.820
Parent previous experience of IC with another child	**Girl**	1.28	0.542	1.32	0.627	1.58	0.717	1.67	0.963	1.92	0.812	2.31	0.788	2.00	0.800
	Boy	1.68	0.935	1.65	0.859	2.21	0.979	2.20	1.012	1.80	0.730	2.01	0.795	1.73	0.750
	Total	1.63	0.905	1.61	0.840	2.13	0.971	2.13	1.018	1.81	0.739	2.05	0.799	1.77	0.760

N.B. Significant differences of the independent variable at sig level 0.05 are denoted by a blue cell.

Table 7 shows the mean ratings for each of the next seven dependent variables measured at each level of independent variable. As can be seen by the cells highlighted in blue, there were some significant main effects of the child having an IC, parent religion, and the parent having had an IC when they were younger. These significant results are discussed in greater detail in sections 4.1.4 – 4.1.9.

4.1.5 Parent minds/would mind their child playing with their IC at school

In general, parents reported that they would sometimes mind their child playing with their IC at school (see Table 7). The sequence of three-way and two-way ANOVAs identified a significant main effect of child having an IC, *F(1,243)=18.387, p<0.001 (η^2=0.070).* Parents whose children currently or previously had an IC would be less likely to mind their child playing with their IC at school than parents whose children did not have an IC (see Table 7). There was a further significant main effect of parent religion *F(2,226)=3.178, p<0.05 (η^2=0.027).* Post hoc comparisons using the Tukey HSD test indicated a nearly significant difference between Christian and Jewish parents (p=0.078). The means suggest that Jewish parents would mind their child playing with their IC at school more than Christian parents and parents from "other" religions (see Table 7). There were no significant effects of parent gender, child gender, parent having an IC when younger or parent having previous experience of ICs with another child.

4.1.6 Parent minds/would mind their child playing with their IC at a friend's house

In general, parents reported that they would sometimes mind their child playing with their IC at a friend's house (see Table 7). The sequence of three-way and two-way ANOVAs identified a significant main effect of child having an IC, *F(1,242)=19.688, p<0.001 (η^2=0.075).* Parents whose children currently or previously had an IC would be less likely to mind their child playing with their IC at a friend's house than parents whose children did not have an IC (see Table 7). There was also a significant main effect of parent religion *F(1,225)=4.275, p<0.05 (η^2=0.037).* Post hoc comparisons using the Tukey HSD test indicated a significant difference between the views of Jewish and Christian parents. Jewish parents would be more likely to mind their child playing with their IC at a friend's house than Christian parents (see Table 7). There were no significant main effects of parent gender, child gender, parent having an IC when younger, and parent having previous experience of ICs with another child.

4.1.7 Parent joins in/would join in with the pretense of the IC e.g. by setting a place at the table

In general, parents reported that they would rarely join in with the pretense of their child's IC by doing things such as setting a place at the table for them (see Table 7). The sequence of three-way and two-way ANOVAs identified a significant main effect of parent having an IC when younger, $F(1,243)=7.741$, $p<0.01$ ($\eta^2=0.031$). Parents who had an IC when they were younger would be more likely to join in with the pretense of the IC with actions such as setting a place at the table than parents who did not have an IC when younger (see Table 7). There was a further significant main effect of parent religion, $F(2,227)=4.690$, $p<0.05$ ($\eta^2=0.040$). Post hoc comparisons using the Tukey HSD test failed to identify the source of this effect, however means suggest that Christian parents were most likely to join in with the act, followed by Jewish parents and then parents from "other" religions. There were no significant main effects of child having an IC, parent gender, child gender, or parent having previous experience of ICs with another child.

4.1.8 Parent joins in/would join in with the pretense of the IC privately at home

In general, parents reported that they would sometimes join in with the pretense of the IC privately at home (see Table 7). The sequence of three-way and two-way ANOVAs identified a significant main effect of child having an IC, $F(1,244)=7.205$, $p<0.01$ ($\eta^2=0.029$). Parents whose children currently or previously had an IC would be more likely to join in with the pretense of the IC privately at home than parents whose children did not have an IC (see Table 7). There was a further significant main effect of parent having an IC when they were younger $F(1,244)=5.408$, $p<0.05$ ($\eta^2=0.022$), with those who had an IC when younger being more likely to join in with the pretense of the IC privately at home than those who did not have an IC when younger (see Table 7).

There was also a significant main effect of parent religion $F(1,228)=3.293$, $p<0.05$ ($\eta^2=0.028$). Post hoc comparisons using the Tukey HSD test indicated a significant difference

between the views of Christian parents and parents from "other" religions, with Christian parents being more likely to join in with the pretense of the IC privately at home than parents from "other" religions, and a nearly significant difference between Jewish parents and parents from "other" religions, with Jewish parents being more likely to join in with the pretense of the IC privately at home than parents from "other" religions (see Table 7). There were no significant main effects of parent gender, child gender, or parent having previous experience of ICs with another child.

4.1.9 Parent joins in/would join in with the pretense of the IC when in public

In general, parents reported that they would sometimes join in with the pretense of the IC when in public, although they were less likely to do so than when in private at home (see Table 7). The sequence of three-way and two-way ANOVAs identified a significant main effect of child having an IC, $F(1,242)=11.275$, $p<0.001$ ($\eta^2=0.045$). Parents whose children currently or previously had an IC would be more likely to join in with the pretense of the IC in public than parents whose children did not have an IC (see Table 7).

There was a further significant main effect of parent religion, $F(2,226)=3.564$, $p<0.05$ ($\eta^2=0.031$), however post hoc comparisons using the Tukey HSD test indicated no significant differences between religious groups. The means however indicated that Christian parents were most likely to join in with the pretense in public, followed by Jewish parents and then parents from "other" religions. There were no significant main effects of parent gender, child gender, parent having an IC when they were younger, or parent having previous experience of ICs with another child.

Table 8 – Means for dependent variables according to each independent variable

		Mind child having an IC in infancy		Mind child having an IC in early childhood		Mind child having an IC in middle childhood		Mind child having an IC in late childhood		Mind child having an IC in early adolescence		Mind child having an IC in adolescence	
		Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD	Mean	SD
IC	Yes	1.06	0.353	1.19	0.435	2.16	1.096	3.56	1.365	4.17	1.251	4.38	1.170
	No	1.76	1.104	2.23	1.214	3.37	1.185	4.21	1.033	4.63	0.805	4.80	0.724
	Total	1.59	1.019	1.98	1.166	3.07	1.273	4.05	1.155	4.52	0.952	4.70	0.871
Parent Gender	**Mother**	1.56	0.982	1.95	1.152	3.06	1.265	4.06	1.172	4.52	0.972	4.68	0.888
	Father	1.81	1.250	2.16	1.267	3.16	1.344	3.94	1.031	4.55	0.810	4.84	0.735
	Total	1.59	1.019	1.98	1.166	3.07	1.273	4.05	1.155	4.52	0.952	4.70	0.871
Child Gender	**Girl**	1.38	0.806	1.74	0.994	2.82	1.191	3.97	1.213	4.45	0.957	4.68	0.838
	Boy	1.74	1.129	2.15	1.253	3.25	1.304	4.10	1.111	4.57	0.948	4.71	0.898
	Total	1.59	1.019	1.98	1.166	3.07	1.273	4.05	1.155	4.52	0.952	4.70	0.871
Parent Religion	**Christian**	1.63	1.078	1.97	1.199	2.97	1.279	4.01	1.158	4.54	0.923	4.70	0.825
	Jewish	1.36	0.580	1.85	0.925	3.22	1.115	4.17	1.101	4.61	0.891	4.73	0.848
	Other	1.96	1.367	2.13	1.513	3.08	1.579	3.83	1.465	4.17	1.404	4.37	1.377
	Total	1.60	1.022	1.96	1.171	3.04	1.275	4.03	1.177	4.52	0.977	4.68	0.902
Parent IC when younger	**Yes**	1.08	0.354	1.13	0.339	2.18	1.023	3.38	1.310	4.18	1.355	4.31	1.341
	No	1.68	1.073	2.12	1.197	3.23	1.251	4.16	1.087	4.58	0.852	4.76	0.742
	Total	1.59	1.020	1.97	1.166	3.07	1.274	4.04	1.156	4.52	0.954	4.70	0.873
Parent previous experience of IC with another child	**Yes**	1.12	0.431	1.35	0.745	2.12	1.211	2.96	1.562	3.69	1.436	4.00	1.386
	No	1.67	1.043	2.13	1.183	3.25	1.183	4.19	1.017	4.65	0.806	4.80	0.728
	Total	1.60	1.003	2.03	1.165	3.11	1.242	4.04	1.169	4.53	0.959	4.70	0.875

N.B. Significant differences of the independent variable at sig level 0.05 are denoted by a blue cell.

Table 8 shows the mean ratings for each of the final six dependent variables measured at each level of independent variable. As can be seen by the cells highlighted in blue, there were some significant main effects of the child having an IC, the parent having had an IC when they were younger, and previous experience of an IC with another child upon parent views of ICs at varying stages of child development. These significant results are discussed in greater detail in sections 4.1.10 – 4.1.12.

4.1.10 Parent minds/would mind child having an IC in infancy (1-3 years old) and early childhood (4-6 years old)

In general, parents reported that they would not at all mind their child having an IC in infancy and would not mind their child having an IC in early childhood (see Table 8). The sequence of three-way and two-way ANOVAs in relation to these two questions identified a significant main effect of child having an IC upon whether the parent minds/would mind their child having an IC in infancy, $F(1,246)=5.806$, $p<0.05$ ($\eta^2=0.023$) and in early childhood, $F(1,248)=11.174$, $p<0.001$ ($\eta^2=0.043$). Parents whose children currently or previously had an IC were happier for their child to have an IC in infancy and early childhood than parents whose children did not have an IC (see Table 8).

There was also a significant main effect of the parent having had an IC when they were younger upon whether they mind/would mind their child having an IC in infancy, $F(1,246)=3.662$, $p<0.05$ ($\eta^2=0.015$) and early childhood $F(1,248)=10.160$, $p<0.01$ ($\eta^2=0.039$). Parents who had ICs when they were younger were happier for their child to have an IC in infancy and early childhood than parents who did not have ICs when younger (see Table 8). There were no significant effects of parent gender, child gender, parent religion, or parent having previous experience of ICs with another child.

4.1.11 Parent minds/would mind child having an IC in middle childhood (7-9 years old) and late childhood (10-12 years old)

In general, parents expressed some concern about their child having an IC in middle childhood and reported that they would mind their child having an IC in late childhood (see Table 8). The sequence of three-way and two-way ANOVAs in relation to these two questions identified a significant main effect of child having an IC for whether they would mind in middle childhood, $F(1,248)=22.058$, $p<0.001$ ($\eta^2=0.082$) and late childhood, $F(1,248)=12.831$, $p<0.001$ ($\eta^2=0.049$). Parents whose children currently or previously had an IC were happier for their child to have an IC in middle childhood and late childhood than parents whose children did not have an IC (see Table 8). There was also a significant main

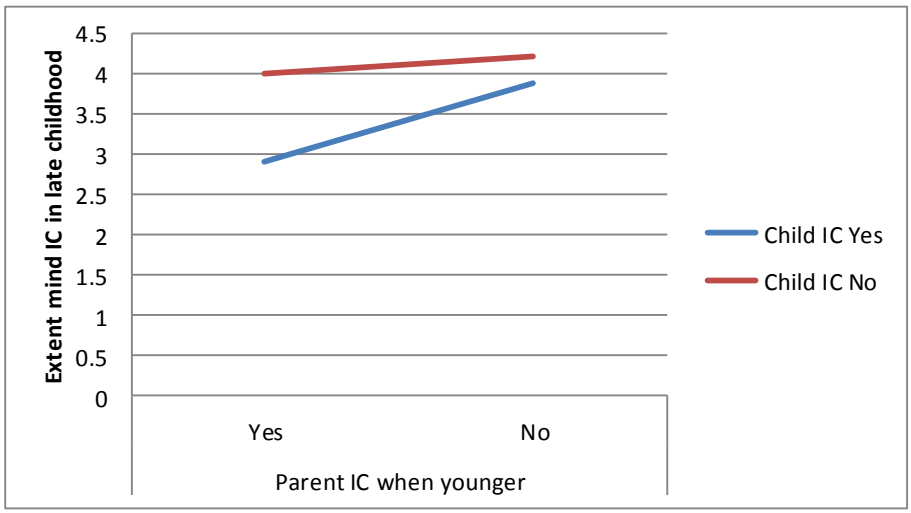
effect of the parent having had an IC when they were younger for whether they would mind in middle childhood, *F(1,248)=8.354, p<0.01 (η^2=0.033)* and late childhood *F(1,248)=7.581, p<0.01 (η^2=0.030)* . Parents who had ICs when they were younger were happier for their child to have an IC in middle childhood and late childhood than parents who did not have ICs when younger (see Table 8).

There was however a significant interaction between child having an IC and parent having an IC when younger upon whether the parent minds/would mind their child having an IC in late childhood, *F(1,248)=4.777, p<0.05 (η^2=0.019).* One-way ANOVAs were conducted to examine the nature of this interaction. There was a significant effect of the parent having an IC when younger on whether the parent would mind their child having an IC in late childhood for parents of children who currently or previously had an IC, *F(1,61)=8.497, p<0.01 (η^2=0.122).* When parents had an IC when younger, they are less likely to mind their child having an IC in late childhood for children who currently or previously have ICs than parents who did not have an IC when younger. There was no significant effect of parent having an IC when younger on whether they would mind their child having an IC in late childhood for children who have never had an IC (see Table 10 and Graph 2).

Table 10 – Means for parent IC when younger x child IC for mind late childhood

		Child IC			
		Yes		**No**	
		Mean	**SD**	**Mean**	**SD**
Parent IC when younger	**Yes**	2.91	1.31	4.00	1.06
	No	3.90	1.28	4.22	1.03

Graph 2 – Interaction between parent IC when younger and child IC for mind late childhood



There was a further significant main effect of the parent having experienced ICs with another of their children upon whether they minded in middle childhood, *F(1,203)=7.208, p<0.01 (η^2=0.034)* and late childhood, *F(1,203)=18.555, p<0.001 (η^2=0.084)* . For this effect, 3.4% of the variance is explained by the parent having experienced ICs with other children for the extent they would mind in middle childhood, whereas 8.4% of the variance is explained by the parent having experienced ICs with other children for the extent they would mind in late childhood. This indicates that this experience of ICs had a greater effect upon the parents' views in late childhood. Parents who had experience of ICs with another of their children were happier for their child to have an IC in middle childhood and late childhood than parents who did not have ICs when younger (see Table 8). There were no significant main effects of parent gender, child gender, or parent religion.

4.1.12 Parent minds/would mind child having an IC in early adolescence (13-15 years old) and adolescence (16-21 years old)

In general, parents reported that they would very much mind their child having an IC in early adolescence and adolescence (see Table 8). As a result of the responses for these variables being skewed, Kruskall-Wallis non-parametric tests were conducted. There was a

significant effect of child having an IC upon whether the parent minds/would mind their child having an IC in early adolescence *H(1)=8.541, p<0.01* and adolescence *H(1)=14.787, p<0.001.* Parents whose children currently or previously had an IC were happier for their child to have an IC in early adolescence and adolescence than parents whose children did not have an IC (see Table 8).

There was also a significant effect of the parent having experienced ICs with other children upon whether they would mind their child having an IC in early adolescence *H(1)=20.181, p<0.001* and adolescence *H(1)=23.207, p<0.001.* Parents who had experience of ICs with other children were happier for their child to have an IC in early adolescence and adolescence than parents who did not have ICs when younger (see Table 8). There was a further significant effect of parent having an IC when younger upon whether the parent would mind the child having an IC in early adolescence *H(1)=2.984, p<0.05* and adolescence *H(1)=8.711, p<0.01.* Parents who had ICs when they were younger were happier for their child to have an IC in early adolescence and adolescence. There were no significant effects of parent gender, child gender or parent religion.

4.2 Summary of Phase 1 results

A number of significant main effects were found during analysis of the questionnaire data. In summary, these were:

1) The child having a current or previous IC – this had a significant effect upon how advantageous the IC was perceived to be, how concerned the parent was, their encouragement of the IC behaviour, their feelings about IC play in a variety of contexts, their own engagement with the IC behaviour, and their feelings about IC play at different stages of child development. In summary, experiencing an IC with their own child had a significant positive effect upon attitudes towards the

behaviour on all attitudes measured except for whether the parent would join in with acts such as setting a place at the table for the IC.

2) The parent having had an IC when they were younger – this had a significant effect upon how advantageous the IC was perceived to be, how concerned the parent felt, the parent's level of encouragement, whether they would join in with the pretense with acts such as setting a place at the table and when in private at home, and their feelings about the IC behaviour at all stages of child development. Whilst there was not a significant effect of parent having had an IC when they were younger on all attitudes measured, those who had the experience of having an IC when younger consistently held more positive views than those who did not have such experience.

3) The parent having previous experience of an IC with another of their children – this had a significant effect upon the level of concern parents felt, their encouragement of the behaviour, and their feelings about the IC engagement in middle and late childhood, early adolescence and adolescence. Whilst there was not a significant main effect of parent having previous experience of an IC with another child upon all attitudes measured, parents with this form of experience of ICs also consistently held more positive views of ICs on all attitudes measured than parents without such experience.

4) The religion of the parent – this had a significant effect upon the extent for which ICs were perceived to be advantageous, the extent to which the parent would mind their child engaging with an IC at school, and whether the parent would join in with the pretense privately at home.

There were also two significant interactions found. These were:

1) Between child gender and parent religion for the extent parents perceived there to be advantages of an IC for their child – whilst there were no significant difference between the views of parents from different religions for girls, Jewish parents felt there were more advantages for their sons than Christian parents and parents from other religions.

2) Between child having an IC and parent having an IC when they were younger for the extent to which the parent would mind their child having an IC in late childhood - parents who had an IC when they were younger were less likely to mind their child having an IC in late childhood for children with current or previous ICs than parents who did not have an IC when younger.

There were no significant main effects of parent gender or child gender found on any of the attitudes measured.

Furthermore, the age of the child affected the views of parents regarding ICs, and all parents became less positive about their children engaging with ICs with increasing age of the child. Despite this, parents with experience of ICs with their child were more positive at each stage of increasing child age than parents whose children did not have ICs.

4.3 Phase 2 Results

4.3.1 Themes

Mothers who were interviewed about their views on ICs all had children with current or previous imaginary friends. Thematic analysis was used to analyse the interview transcripts from the mothers. The following themes were identified as being important – as they occurred throughout multiple interviews.

Four main themes and a number of subthemes were identified from the codes generated from the interviews. All themes relate to the views expressed by mothers regarding their children having ICs and their experiences of the phenomenon.

Theme 1 – Imaginary Companion Supports Child Development

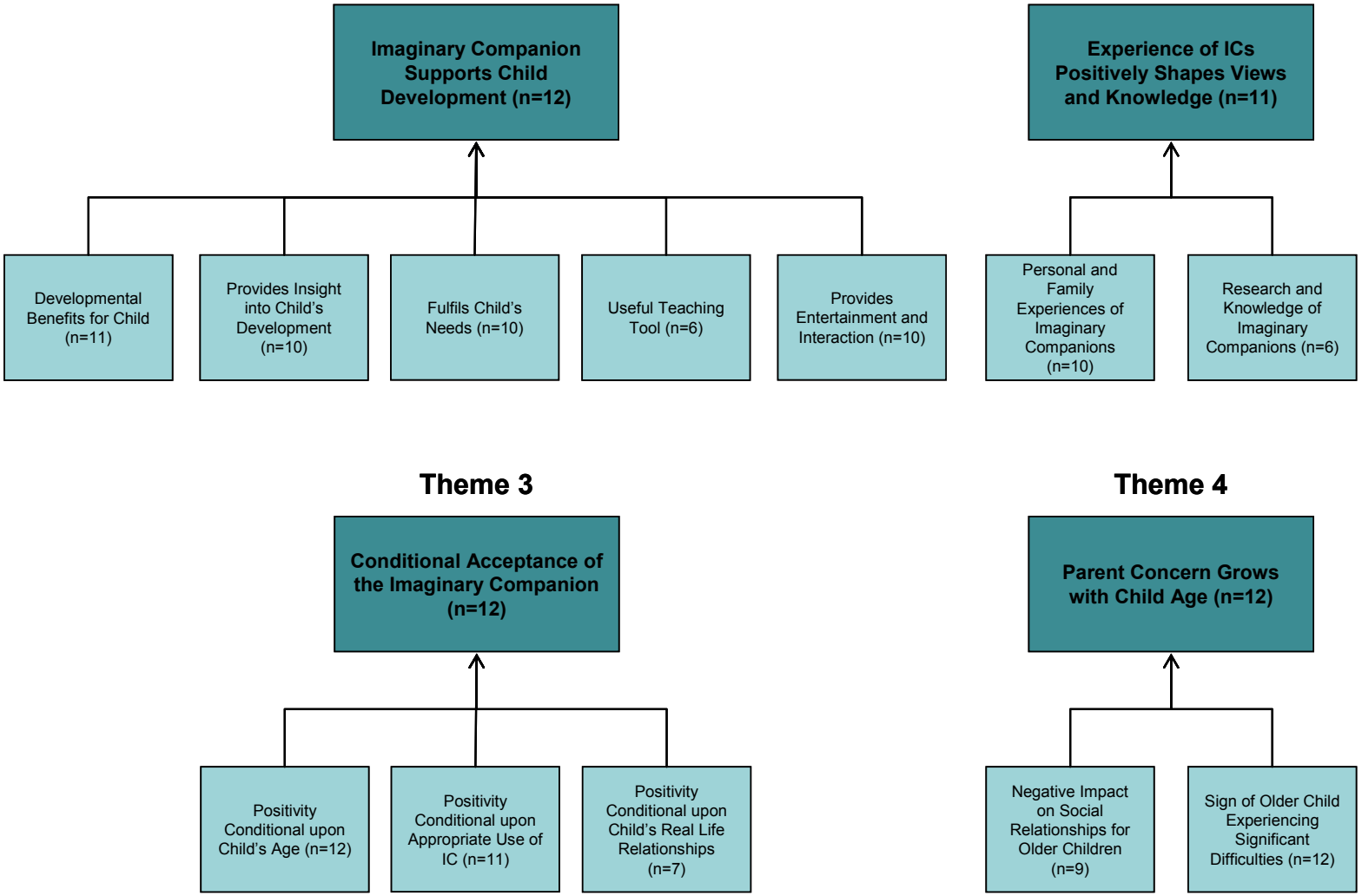
Theme 2 – Experience of Imaginary Companions Positively Shapes Views and Knowledge

Theme 3 – Conditional Acceptance of the Imaginary Companion

Theme 4 – Parent Concern Grows with Child Age

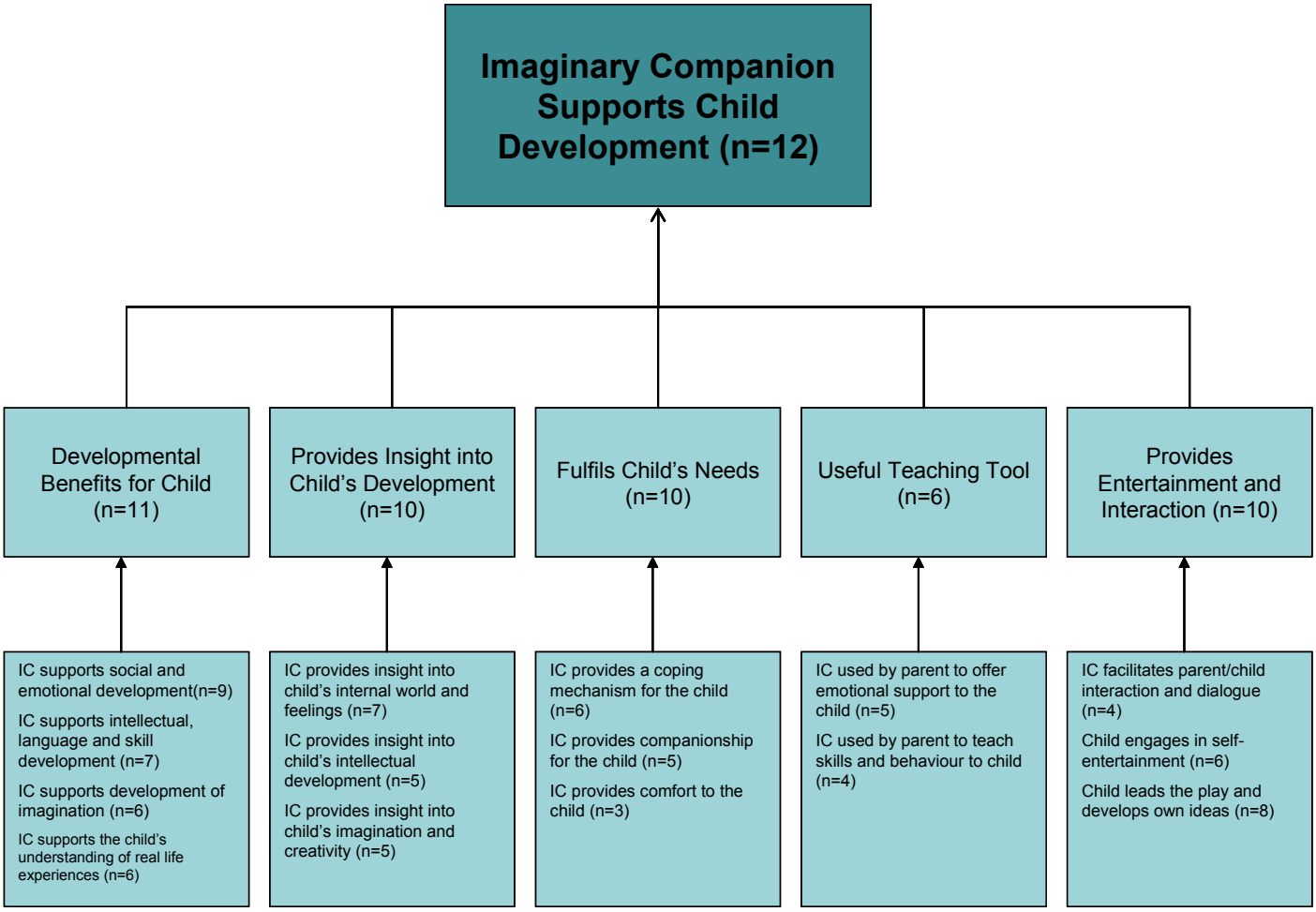
Each theme with its related sub-themes is presented in Figure 1 below. Each theme is then described and each subtheme illustrated with a related quote for each code. See Appendix G for a sample interview transcript.

Figure 1 – Overview of all themes and subthemes (codes are presented in subsequent figures)



4.3.1.1 Theme 1: Imaginary Companion Supports Child Development

Figure 2 –Theme 1: Imaginary Companion Supports Child Development



This theme identified that mothers interviewed felt that the IC supported the child's overall development. Eleven mothers felt that there were developmental benefits for the child having an IC, in that it supported the child's social and emotional development, supported their intellectual and skills development particularly language and vocabulary, supported the child to develop their imagination, and supported their understanding of their everyday real life experiences (see Table 11)

Table 11 – Example quotes for sub-theme "Developmental Benefits for Child

Sub-theme: Developmental Benefits for Child		
Code	**Interview Excerpt**	**ID**
IC supports social and emotional development	*It has given him kind of confidence to be out there, talk to people, and not be shy...*	JD
IC supports intellectual, language and skill development	*It's well beyond the conversation that he would have with peers. Playground language and the language of play with kids is very different from the way that he tells these stories or will talk about what's happening.*	EB
IC supports development of imagination	*I think as I say, it fuelled his imagination massively…He loved to talk about it. He loved to talk about situations and experiences that he hadn't had but Mick Nick had.*	JD
IC supports understanding of real life experiences	*And I feel that she used to use Giggett as a way of making sense of the world. So whatever we were doing Giggett would be doing as well sort of thing and I think it was just her way of trying to process what was happening.*	SE

Ten of the mothers also talked about their child's interactions with their ICs as providing insight into their child's development which helped them to appropriately support their child. Through the IC, mothers interviewed talked about getting insight into their child's internal world and feelings, their intellectual development, and their imagination and creativity (see Table 12).

Table 12 – Example quotes for sub-theme "Provides Insight into Child's Development

Sub-theme: Provides Insight into Child's Development		
Code	**Interview Excerpt**	**ID**
IC provides insight into child's internal world and feelings	*It's really interesting to hear what he's saying because it reflects things that are going on in his life.*	JC
IC provides insight into child's intellectual development	*We get insight into his development and lots of language and vocabulary coming through that we've read in stories that will appear and I think, "Gosh, that's gone in". It's been absorbed and it's lovely to hear it coming out in a different situation because its part of his development…I wouldn't necessarily hear the language coming out if he didn't talk in this way.*	EB

IC provides insight into child's imagination and creativity	*An advantage is the fact that I think to myself he has got a very very good imagination and he is very bright as well. I get to see how imaginative he is because I watch him interact with them.*	LD

Furthermore, ten mothers talked about the IC supporting the child's development by fulfilling the needs of the child and serving a specific purpose for them. The mothers talked about the IC providing a coping mechanism, companionship, and comfort for the child (see Table 13).

Table 13 – Example quotes for sub-theme "Fulfils Child's Needs"

Sub-theme: Fulfils Child's Needs		
Code	**Interview Excerpt**	**ID**
IC provides a coping mechanism for the child	*If something happens he does kind of put that into his own little world and it is his way maybe of coping with it or getting through it or understanding it.*	LD
IC provides companionship for the child	*So the advantages would be having someone to talk to…and someone to play with when she didn't have anyone to play with.*	SK
IC provides comfort for the child	*She often tells me she's lonely, that she feels lonely in bed and she doesn't like it and she wants someone to look after her so I think it's quite a comforting thing for her to have them.*	LW

Half of the mothers interviewed also talked about the IC being a useful tool for supporting their child's understanding and development. The mothers talked about using the IC to offer emotional support to their child, and to teach skills and appropriate behaviour to the child, which they felt to be an advantage of the IC (see Table 14).

Table 14 – Example quotes for sub-theme "Useful Teaching Tool"

Sub-theme: Useful Teaching Tool		
Code	**Interview Excerpt**	**ID**
IC used by parent to offer emotional support to the child	*When [daughter] was anxious or upset before going to school; I think I probably might have asked "Wouldn't Lilly be there with you?" "You'll have Lilly with you" kind of thing... To try and reassure her that way.*	SF
IC used by parent to teach skills and behaviour to child	*And we'd have things like the two Ellies fighting each other and we could say well that's not really very nice, we don't do that kind of thing to our friends. They're very useful, it's like teaching things of how to behave.*	EW

Ten mothers also talked about the child's interaction with the IC providing entertainment and interaction for the child, and in doing so supporting their developing independence and social development. The mothers talked about the IC helping to facilitate interaction and dialogue between them and their child, the IC supporting the child to engage in self-entertainment and to develop their independence, and the IC supporting the child to lead their own play and develop their own ideas for play (see Table 15).

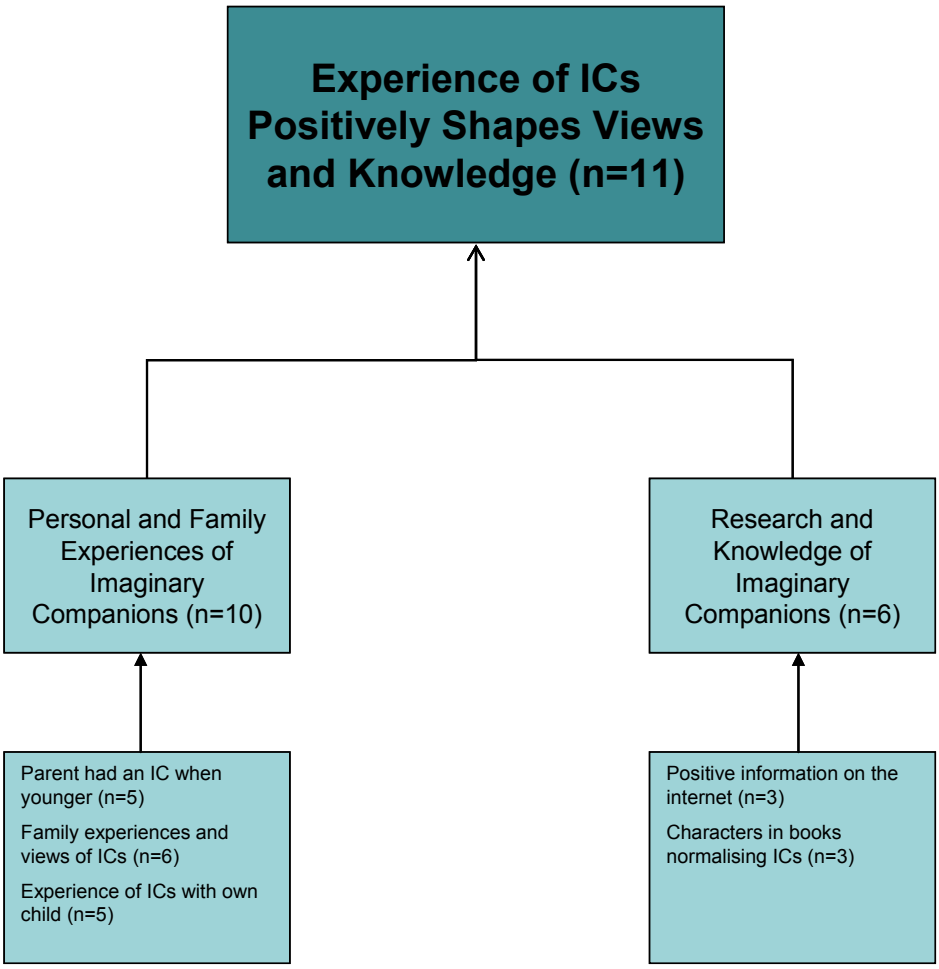
Table 15 – Example quotes for sub-theme "Provides Entertainment and Interaction"

Sub-theme: Provides Entertainment and Interaction		
Code	**Interview Excerpt**	**ID**
IC facilitates parent/child interaction and dialogue	*It makes me have a whole afternoon of dialogue with him that's not based around a story or something that we're doing, it's just something that he's leading on completely through imagination and I think that's amazing.*	EB
Child engages in self-entertainment	*He is really self-sufficient in his own company. He plays really happily by himself cause there's a lot going on.*	LD
Child leads the play and develops ideas	*I will join in and pretend whatever he's talking about…he's got all the ideas and I just play along with it.*	JC

Overall, the mothers interviewed felt that the IC was advantageous for both the child and the parent in that it helped to support the child's social, emotional, and intellectual development.

4.3.1.2 Theme 2: Experience of Imaginary Companions Positively Shapes Views and Knowledge

Figure 3 -Theme 2: Experience of ICs Positively Shapes Views and Knowledge



This theme identified that mothers felt that their positive views and knowledge of ICs were shaped through their own positive experiences of ICs when they were younger and with their children, as well as their family members' experiences of ICs, particularly their mothers who had experienced them with their own children. They also felt that through carrying out research and gathering information on ICs which normalised them for the mother, their views were positively shaped. Ten mothers talked about personal and family experiences of ICs, including themselves or their partner having an IC when they were a child, their family members having ICs and their positive experiences of these, as well as their recent experiences of ICs with their children, as all helping to positively shape their views on

the phenomenon. Mothers also talked about how speaking to family members who had experienced ICs, particularly their own mothers, had helped to alleviate any initial concerns they had (see Table 16).

Table 16 – Example quotes for sub-theme "Personal and Family Experiences of ICs"

Sub-theme: Personal and Family Experiences of ICs		
Code	**Interview Excerpt**	**ID**
Parent had an IC when younger	*If I hadn't known about imaginary friends from me having one, I'd have been doing a lot of reading and trying to find out what the hell this is cause I haven't seen much about it.*	EB
Family experiences and views of ICs	*Well I told my mum and because my brother had one she was just sort of like oh P had two and it just wasn't a big deal.*	NR
Experience of IC with own child	*You know as I said my initial thoughts were 'oh there is something wrong', you know this isn't normal. He shouldn't be thinking like this and seeing this person. But in fact it's the opposite. It's something to welcome and to use to help him.*	JD

Furthermore, half of the mothers talked about research on the internet and knowledge of ICs through characters in books as helping to shape their views positively and normalising ICs for them. Some mothers talked about information on the internet informing them of the benefits of ICs and the positive characteristics of children who have ICs, as well as giving advice on how to manage the behaviour, as being helpful in shaping their views. Other mothers talked about the character 'Soren Lorenson' in the children's book 'Charlie and Lola' as helping to normalise ICs for them and shaping their views (see Table 17).

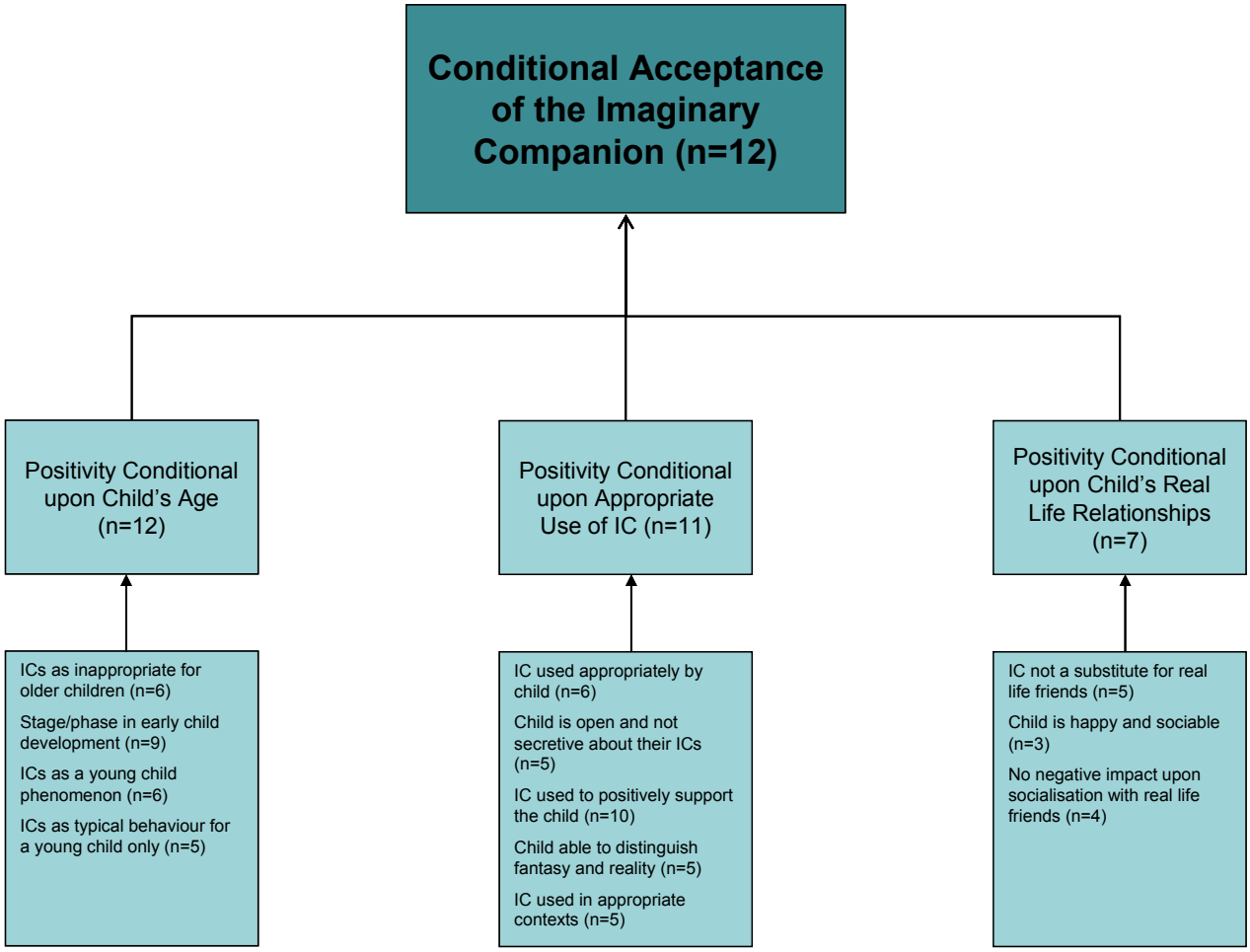
Table 17 – Example quotes for sub-theme "Research and Knowledge of ICs"

Sub-theme: Research and Knowledge of ICs		
Code	**Interview Excerpt**	**ID**
Positive information on the internet	*I was googling imaginary friends and it just totally settled my mind. And then it just relaxed me into it and made me realise that there was nothing to be worried about. Because it just sort of portrayed it as a really quite positive thing, that children are really creative and she does love making up stories and doing role play, and all that.*	NR
Characteristics in books normalising ICs	*We have all had the "Charlie and Lola" book, so we all know about Soren Lorensen! So in that respect it was certainly something I had heard about anyway and I was aware of and I knew it wasn't anything to be worried about.*	SE

Overall, the views of mothers interviewed regarding ICs were positively shaped by their own and family members' experiences and positive information that is available on the internet and in books about ICs which could then be applied to the experiences they were having with their own children.

4.3.1.3 Theme 3: Conditional Acceptance of the Imaginary Companion

Figure 4 –Theme 3: Conditional Acceptance of the Imaginary Companion



This theme identified that whilst mothers interviewed held positive views about their children's ICs, their positivity was dependent upon aspects of the child's presentation and development, and the use of the IC. All twelve mothers talked about the age of the child as affecting their views. Mothers interviewed were all very positive about their child having an IC; however this positivity was conditional upon the child being a young age. Many mothers stated their positive views and followed them by "at his/her age now". It was apparent that their views changed regarding ICs for older children. Furthermore, their concern grew with increasing child age. Mothers interviewed talked about ICs being inappropriate for older children, being a stage in early child development which children

grow out of, being a young child phenomenon which they mainly thought was apparent for pre-school children, and being typical and acceptable behaviour for a young child only and not older children (see Table 18).

Table 18 – Example quotes for sub-theme "Positivity Conditional upon Child's Age"

Sub-theme: Positivity Conditional upon Child's Age		
Code	**Interview Excerpt**	**ID**
ICs as inappropriate for older children	*You're growing up and as you're growing up you're meant to be leaving childish things behind and having an imaginary friend is showing that you're not really growing up, you're still attached to something.*	JC
Stage/phase in early child development	*He's just a kid and I think it's part of the learning and growing process. I don't think it's a bad thing. I think a lot of young children have imaginary friends and it's quite natural.*	NR
ICs as a young child phenomenon	*I don't know where I would have got the idea from but I have always thought that young, very young children had imaginary friends rather than you know further up in junior school.*	SF
ICs as typical behaviour for a young child only	*Yeah it doesn't bother me, as I said if he was to get older and he was I don't know maybe over ten or something I might be a little bit more concerned as I may be thinking something may not be quite right… But to be honest he's young and I just think it's natural, it's just a natural thing*	JC

Eleven mothers stated positive views that were conditional upon the IC being used appropriately. Their views were positively affected by their child using their IC "appropriately", such as for imaginative play, entertainment and companionship, and not as a scapegoat or to place blame on. None of the children talked about in the interviews used their ICs in that way, and mothers stated that their views would be more negative if this was the case. The mothers also talked about their children being open about their ICs with them, which resulted in a lack of concern regarding the IC. They stated that if the IC was more secretive, it would cause some concern for them. They also talked about the IC being used supportively by the child and as serving a purpose for them, and the IC being used in this way resulted in a lack of concern for the mothers. The mothers also talked about their child understanding the difference between fantasy and reality, and knowing that their IC was

pretend, and this affected their views. Mothers felt that if the child did not understand that the imaginary friend was not real, they would have greater concern. The mothers also stated that they were happy for their child to engage with their IC with them and close family in the home, but not in school or with other people. It was apparent that context affected the views of some mothers about their child's engagement with their IC (see Table 19).

Table 19 – Example quotes for sub-theme "Positivity Conditional upon Appropriate Use of IC"

Sub-theme: Positivity Conditional upon Appropriate Use of IC		
Code	**Interview Excerpt**	**ID**
IC used appropriately by child	*I don't feel worried about it so I just sort of think….like if she was using them as a um I don't know whether children do this but this is what is portrayed in books and stuff, you know as their naughty friend who does all the naughty things…If it was like that I think I'd be more concerned about it and be sort of thinking when's this going to stop this is a behavioural thing, but I don't see it as a behavioural thing, I see it just as a development thing actually.*	NR
Child is open and not secretive about their IC	*I think part of the reason why I feel so not bothered about it is because I know how she is using it, whereas if it then became secret from me I think I'd probably worry about it.*	NR
IC used to positively support the child	*When he was little and had his imaginary friend I was happy for him to have him because it would make him feel safe.*	ET
Child able to distinguish fantasy/reality	*(SK): I said "Do you know that she's made up?" and she said "Yes I know she's not real" but she said "I haven't got any brothers or sisters so she is my friend." (Interviewer): Is that quite important to you that she knows it's not real? (SK): Well I felt so just because I don't really want her to sit in school and talk to nobody...*	SK
IC used in appropriate contexts	*I mean I probably wouldn't want him to necessarily be doing it whilst he's at school but as far as I know he doesn't… I think I'd be more worried about him being teased about it.*	JC

Seven mothers also talked about their positive views being dependent upon the child having good real life relationships with peers. The mothers interviewed stated that they were not concerned about the child having an IC because it was not a substitute for real

life friends, that the child was happy and sociable, and that it had no negative impact upon the development of real life friends. They stated that as long as this was the case, they were happy for their child to have an IC; however if the IC was affecting their real life relationships they would be unhappy about it (see Table 20).

Table 20 – Example quotes for sub-theme "Positivity Conditional upon Child's Real Life Relationships"

Sub-theme: Positivity Conditional upon Child's Real Life Relationships		
Code	**Interview Excerpt**	**ID**
IC not a substitute for real life friends	*The whole concept of having an imaginary friend I wasn't worried about because I know that he has a lot of real friends.*	SA
Child is happy and sociable	*…as far as I'm aware he's a happy and well-adjusted child so I have no worries about him having an imaginary friend.*	JC
No negative impact upon socialisation with real life friends	*I was happy about it as long as he wasn't choosing Mr Dee Dee over real life friends*	ET

Overall, the mothers interviewed were very positive about their children's ICs but this was dependent upon the child being a young age and the IC being used appropriately by the child and in a supportive way, and not to the detriment of real life friendships and relationships.

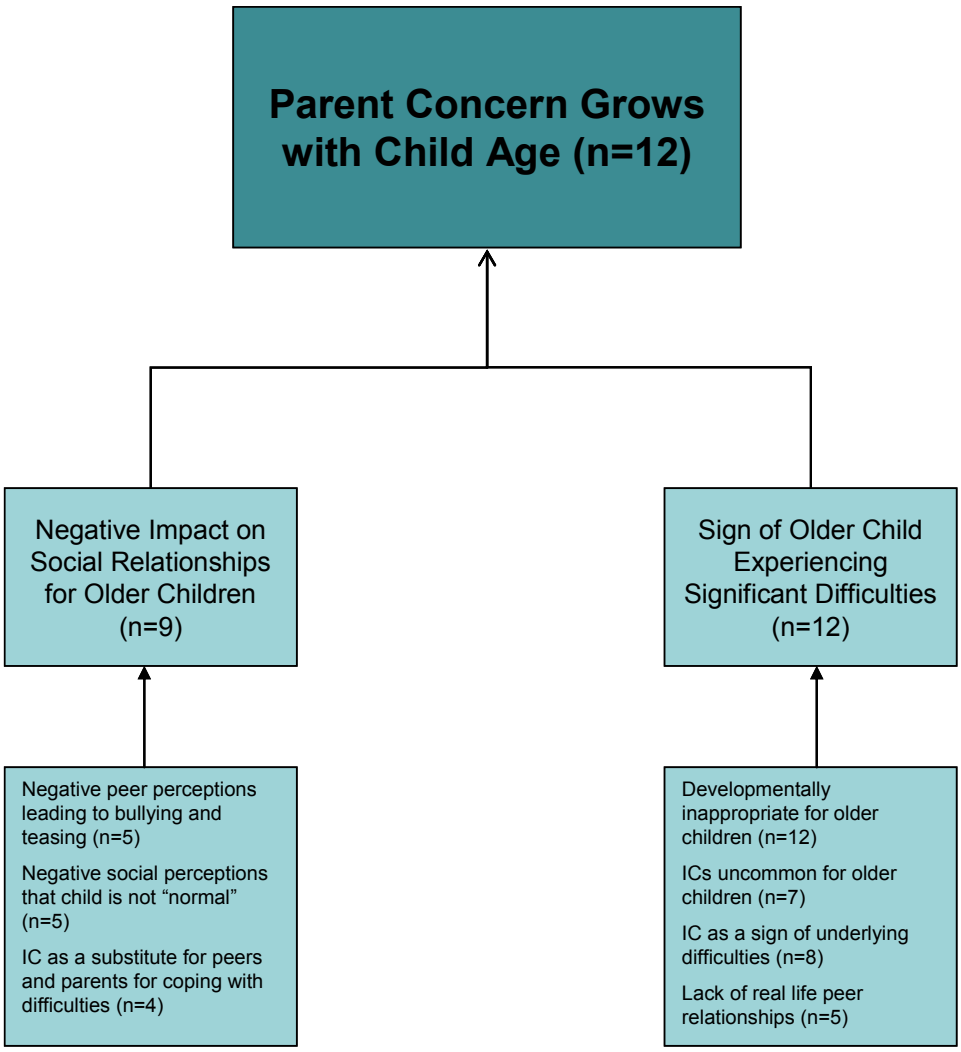
One mother interviewed (SE) had more negative views about her child having an IC even at a young age, but stated that this was due to the wider difficulties her daughter had. This mother's daughter had a diagnosis of autism and she was concerned about the extent of the fantasy world that the child lived in and the effect that it had upon her real life friendships. It was apparent that her views were conditional upon and affected by the wider difficulties experienced by her daughter. This mother did however state that her concern was not around the concept of ICs but around the child's general difficulties for which the IC was one part of. This mother stated:

"It's not about the imaginary friend behaviour, that's fine, and I know that lots of children have imaginary friends and they come and they grow out of it... It is more about [daughter] in particular I think… she is in her own world and so I don't want to encourage that because she needs, we need to find ways to help her connect rather than feed the fantasy."
(Interview SE)

Parents who have children with autism and other developmental disorders may therefore have different views that are affected by additional factors, and have additional concerns about ICs due to them being encompassed in the wider difficulties experienced by the child and the wider concerns of the parent.

4.3.1.4 Theme 4: Parent Concern Grows with Child Age

Figure 5 –Theme 4: Parent Concern Grows with Child Age



This theme identified that the mothers interviewed would grow more concerned about their child having an IC as the child grew older, most specifically for some mothers after the age of seven years and for all mothers after the age of ten years. Nine mothers talked about the social implications for the child if they had an IC at an older age. They were concerned that the child's peers would perceive the behaviour at being strange, which could lead to bullying and teasing for the child. They were also concerned that there would be a societal perception that the child is not "normal", which could lead to reduced self-esteem for the child and social isolation. Furthermore, they would be concerned that the child would choose the IC as their preferred coping mechanism over talking about their difficulties with real life peers and parents (see Table 21).

Table 21 – Example quotes for sub-theme "Negative Impact on Social Relationships for Older Children"

Sub-theme: Negative Impact on Social Relationships for Older Children		
Code	**Interview Excerpt**	**ID**
Negative peer perceptions leading to bullying and teasing	*I think when they're older they would come into much more ridicule for having an imaginary friend. At his age or at 6 and 7 is fine but as they get older I think they would come into problems, not with me but in normal life and with their school friends.*	JC
Negative social perceptions that child is not "normal"	*I think everyone becomes more cynical the older kids are and suddenly it's not the norm anymore. Whereas when they're 3 or 4, and 5 or 6, everything is the norm. Being crazy is the norm.*	EB
IC as a substitute for peers and parents for coping with difficulties	*I guess I would worry that she was upset about things and talking to her imaginary friend about it rather than me, and therefore she would have stuff going on in her life that was worrying her that I wouldn't be able to help her with.*	NR

Furthermore, all twelve mothers were concerned that an older child who had ICs would be experiencing significant difficulties in life for which they required the coping mechanism of an IC. Some mothers were concerned about the child's overall development

and felt that ICs were developmentally inappropriate for older children. They were also concerned that ICs were uncommon for older children and must therefore be a sign that the child was experiencing some underlying difficulties. They were concerned that the child would have underlying emotional difficulties, and one mother even talked about the child possibly having schizophrenia or other mental health difficulties. The mothers were also concerned that the child would be experiencing social difficulties and the IC would be a sign that the child had a lack of real life friendships (see Table 22).

Table 22 – Example quotes for sub-theme "Negative Impact on Social Relationships for Older Children"

Sub-theme: Sign of Older Child Experiencing Significant Difficulties		
Code	**Interview Excerpt**	**ID**
ICs as developmentally inappropriate for older children	*I suppose you do worry about stages and development stages…How well are they doing, are they like the other kids are they slower are they faster. So you try not to but you do! And for me I just reckon as you get older you hopefully get more mature at dealing with your emotions or expressions and you'd be able to express yourself without the need of an imaginary friend.*	SA
ICs as uncommon for older children	*I don't think I knew anyone who had imaginary friends when I was twelve years old or thirteen or fourteen. So I think I would be concerned… I didn't know anyone that had, or I didn't realise anyone had imaginary friends beyond that sort of age, I just sort of thought it was more that pre-adolescent sort of age.*	SA
IC as a sign of underlying difficulties	*I think I'd be concerned about what the hell was going on with him to make him regress back to being a child.*	ET
Lack of real life peer relationships	*I'd be worried that he wasn't living out those stories with other people or that it was maybe a replacement for friends or that he wasn't getting the interaction or the creativity anywhere else.*	EB

Overall, the mothers interviewed all stated that they would be concerned if their child continued to have an IC in late childhood and adolescence. They felt that a child who is above the age of ten years old and still had an IC must be experiencing some underlying

social and emotional difficulties. Their positive views regarding ICs changed when they considered their child being above the age of ten years old and still having their IC.

4.4 Summary of Phase 2 results

The key themes abstracted from the interviews were:

1) Imaginary Companion Supports Child Development
2) Experience of Imaginary Companions Positively Shapes Views and Knowledge
3) Conditional Acceptance of the Imaginary Companion
4) Parent Concern Grows with Child Age

Overall, the mothers interviewed were very positive about their children's ICs and stated few disadvantages for the child and little concern. They felt that the IC positively supported the child's development in a range of ways, and that their experience of ICs and those of family members had helped to positively shape their views on the phenomenon. Their positivity was however dependent upon the child's age, the IC being used appropriately and supportively, and the child having good social interactions with real life peers. Furthermore, the mothers would become concerned about their children having ICs in late childhood and adolescence, despite having little concern about them in infancy, early and middle childhood. Chapter 5 will discuss these findings in greater detail.

4.5 Summary of Results

The results of Phase 1 and Phase 2 of this study identify trends that were consistent across the data corpus, as well as some difference in the views expressed. The main finding from Phase 1 was that experience of ICs, in particular the child having an IC, had a positive impact upon the views of parents with regard to ICs and their child's engagement with them. This was also apparent in the Phase 2 interviews, which identified experience of ICs to have positively shaped parents' views and knowledge of them. The finding from Phase 2 that

mothers felt experience had positively influenced their views and relieved any initial concerns they had indicates experience to have a potential causal effect upon parent views. This is discussed in greater detail in section 5.2.1 of Chapter 5.

Both Phase 1 and Phase 2 of the study identified parents who were accepting of ICs to actually have conditional acceptance of them, that is they were happy for their children to engage with an IC so long as it was not affecting their social interactions with real life peers, the IC was being used appropriately, and the fantasy/reality distinction was not blurred. A trend in parents not having full acceptance of their child's IC was uncovered, with parents seemingly always watching out for any negative impact or signs of deficiency that may be apparent as a result of the IC behaviour.

A further trend that was apparent between the results of Phase 1 and 2 data, was that the age of the child impacts upon the views of parents. In Phase 1, the views of parents with regard to their child's engagement with an IC negatively correlated with the age of the child. As the child's age increased and they moved through the various stages of child development, all parents stated that they would be less happy for their child to engage with an IC. Furthermore, qualitative analysis of open-ended questions in Phase 1 identified age to be a key concern for parents. The negative impact of age upon parent views of ICs was also apparent from the data collected during the Phase 2 interviews, and participants all identified the child's age as being a factor that impacted upon their views. It transpired from the interview data that parents feel ICs are a normal part of early child development but are uncommon and a sign of something deficient if they appear or are still in a child's life after the age of 8 years old. It was apparent from both phases that parents would worry about their child having an IC after middle childhood.

Whilst a number of trends were identified between the two phases of data collection, findings were not completely consistent. Mothers interviewed in Phase 2 focussed on the positive aspects of ICs upon their child's development, including their social,

academic and emotional development. On the other hand, NIC parents in Phase 1 did not perceive there to be much advantage at all of an IC for a child, and these parents focussed on the negative social impact that ICs were thought to have. This further highlights the impact of experience of ICs upon parent views and is discussed in more detail in Chapter 5.

Chapter 5 – Discussion

This chapter begins with a summary of the research findings in relation to each research question, as outlined at the end of Chapter 2. The main findings from this study will then be examined and discussed. Where applicable, reference is made to existing literature. The strengths and limitations of the study, and future directions for research in the area are also considered and the chapter ends with a discussion of the implication of the findings for professionals within the fields of educational psychology, education and childcare.

A brief discussion of how the sample population compared to that of other studies can be found in Appendix H.

5.1 Summary of findings in relation to the research questions

This study examined the attitudes of parents to their children having imaginary companions and the factors that affect their views. The first part of the study examined the views of parents whose children both did and did not have ICs, and the second part of the study further explored the views of twelve mothers whose children currently or previously had an IC.

5.1.1 RQ 1 – What are parents' general attitudes about ICs and what factors relate to their views?

In general, parents held positive views of ICs, with the majority of parents stating they did/would not at all mind their child having an IC in infancy or early childhood. Parents however held neutral views with regard to their encouragement of the phenomenon with their children and their own involvement in the pretense. In general, parents appear to be most inclined to ignore their child's interaction with their IC, and whilst the majority of parents expressed positive views regarding ICs, they appear wary of actively encouraging them with their child. Brooks and Knowles (1982) found that the majority of parents in their study would ignore their child engaging with an IC, and whilst Manosevitz et al. (1973) found that the majority of parents (50%) would encourage the behaviour they also found that a

high proportion (43%) would in fact ignore it. Parents' inclination to ignore the behaviour as opposed to actively encourage it may in fact be indicative of their uncertainty around the value of ICs. Parents may be cautious of encouraging the behaviour but also reluctant to discourage it, perhaps for fear of upsetting the child. They may therefore feel that it is safer to simply ignore it. Furthermore, parent views on their encouragement of ICs with their children vary according to experience, and this will be further discussed in section 5.2.1.

Gleason (2005) found that parent views of pretend play vary according to the context in which the play occurs. In the present study, parents' views about their children's ICs showed slight variation according to the situation in which the IC was present, with parents being less encouraging of engagement with an IC when in the presence of peers. Parents appear to be less accepting of their children's ICs when they have the potential of negatively impacting upon real life peer relationships and social interaction. They appear to be particularly wary of the negative social perceptions that may arise from having an IC and cautious of them leading to bullying and teasing. Parents may therefore limit their child's play or be less accepting of it in social contexts. Parents were also more inclined to join in with the pretense of the IC privately at home than in public, again reflective of their views about the appropriateness and value of such play in different contexts. Many of the NIC parents talked about concerns regarding the implications of an IC upon the real life peer relationships of children and were also concerned about children with ICs being bullied and teased by peers, and these views may be reflected in the parents' reluctance to join in and encourage the play in public contexts. Parents may carefully regulate their interactions and involvement in play with the IC as a result of wanting to control what the child learns as appropriate behaviour. Their concerns about the social status of their child may be further reflected in the views stated by NIC parents that they would mind their children engaging with an IC at school or at a friend's house.

Like the findings of Brooks and Knowles (1982) and Gleason (2005), mothers and fathers in this study held similar views regarding their child's engagement with an IC, and whilst views were also similar for boys and girls, parents were consistently more positive about girls' engagement with ICs. Furthermore, this study found that fathers held slightly more positive views than mothers in terms of their encouragement of the phenomenon, their involvement in it and their view of its appropriateness in certain contexts. This is in contrast to Brooks and Knowles (1982) and Gleason (2005), who found that mothers held slightly more positive views than fathers about ICs and pretend play. Fathers in the current study were however less accepting than mothers of their child's engagement with an IC with increasing age, and this will be discussed in more detail in section 5.2.2. Whilst the findings of this study suggest there to be no statistical differences in views according to parent gender, the small sample of fathers means that the views expressed may not be representative of the general population. Further investigation using a larger sample of fathers is required before any firm conclusions can be drawn.

The views of parents in this study varied according to their experience of ICs with their children, as well as experience of themselves having an IC when younger and having another child with an IC. Furthermore, mothers interviewed stated experience of the phenomenon to be a key factor in shaping their views and understanding of ICs. This study therefore suggests that experience of ICs plays a key role in supporting parents' understanding of the behaviour and in shaping their views (see section 5.2.1). Another key finding was that parents were less accepting of their child's IC with increasing child age. Mothers interviewed all stated conditional acceptance of their child's IC, with age being the key factor, and parents in phase 1 of the study stated that they would very much mind their child having an IC after middle childhood (see section 5.2.2). In addition, the views of parents from different religions varied at times, with some variation in views of ICs for boys and girls found for Jewish parents (see section 5.2.4). Aside from this interaction between

parent religion and child gender, there was little variation in parents' views of ICs according to child gender and little variation in the views of mothers and fathers.

5.1.2 RQ 2 – What are the advantages and disadvantages of ICs, and what factors related to parents' perceptions of these?

Findings from phase 1 indicated that parents generally felt there were both advantages and disadvantages for their children having an IC; however experience of ICs related to differing views on the benefits of ICs. IC parents indicated that they considered there to be many more advantages for their child than NIC parents. NIC parents indicated that they considered there to be a greater level of disadvantage for a child with an IC than advantage, with the reverse apparent for IC parents. NIC parents focused more on the negative implications of the IC on the social interactions of children, whereas IC parents felt that the IC positively supported the child socially, emotionally and cognitively. Furthermore, some effect of parent religion was observed with Jewish parents perceiving there to be more advantages than parents from the group of 'other' religions and this is discussed in section 5.2.4.

Davis (2006) suggests that some children may use their IC to blame inappropriate behaviours on. The IC being used as a scapegoat was the most commonly cited disadvantage by IC parents in phase 1; however only three parents mentioned that this was a disadvantage which they had experienced and had to manage, whereas other parents who cited scapegoating did so as a conditional disadvantage, that is, 'if' the child used their IC to blame inappropriate behaviours on then they would see this as being a disadvantage of the IC. Those parents may have held more negative views of the phenomenon in general if this had have been the case.

Overall, parents identified the main advantage of an IC as supporting the emotional development of the child. Whilst IC parents also felt there to be a number of benefits for the

emotional development of children, they also focused on the social benefits of having an IC. Mothers interviewed identified a number of advantages for both their child and themselves but struggled to identify disadvantages, again stating conditional acceptance of the IC in that there were no disadvantages so long as the child was young, was using the IC appropriately and it was not affecting their social interactions with real life peers. Whilst no consistent themes emerged regarding disadvantages, one mother did however talk about the inconvenience that her son's IC caused her and another spoke of feeling some awkwardness when her daughter spoke of her IC in front of friends who could not understand what she was talking about.

Recent researchers have cited a number of developmental benefits afforded to a child with an IC (e.g. Bouldin et al., 2002; Taylor & Carlson, 1997), including its benefits for cognitive and social development. A main theme that emerged from the interviews was reflective of these findings; the mothers' viewed the IC as supporting child development. This was indicated to be both an advantage for the child and the parent. The finding that mothers valued the support of the IC for social, emotional and language development, as well as the insight into these areas of development that came from hearing and observing the interactions of the child with their IC, lends support to the findings of Gleason (2005) that mothers value the cognitive and educational benefits of pretend play. Whilst the mothers interviewed also afforded their child's IC with the benefit of entertainment for the child and family, they appeared to focus on this less than the cognitive and educational benefits when asked what they felt the advantages of the IC to be.

Furthermore, half of the mothers interviewed identified an advantage to be that the IC supported their child's understanding of real life experiences, thus helping them to make sense of the world. They felt that having an IC supported the child's use of fantasy play as a way of exploring and processing events that were happening in their life. Majors (2009)

found that all children in her study used their IC as a response to life events which *"in play/fantasy mode provides a safer non-threatening environment to explore and experiment with ideas and feelings."* (p.98) Parents appear to be happy for their young children to use an IC as a means for exploring and making sense of the world, perhaps because this way they get some insight into their child's inner world and feelings.

The finding that the majority of the mothers interviewed acknowledged a benefit of the IC as fulfilling a need of the child supports the findings of Hoff (2004-2005) and Majors (2009) that ICs serve a specific purpose for a child. The mothers placed greatest focus upon the IC being a useful coping mechanism and providing companionship for the child, purposes that were identified as common in previous studies. Hoff (2004-2005) concluded that having an IC positively serves a child by compensating for a lack of psychological and emotional support from their outer environment, meaning they seek such support internally. In chapter 2, I questioned the impact of this statement on the views of parents by asking whether parents would feel alarmed or a sense of guilt that their child needed to compensate for a lack of support through the creation of an IC, or whether they would feel pleased that their child was getting the support they required. In the case of one parent, both instances were a yes. One mother in this study talked about her guilt that her child had created an IC in relation to hearing his parents arguing, but then a sense of relief that he had found a means for coping with an uncertain situation. Through the creation of the IC, this mother was provided with greater insight into his feelings because they were played out through his pretense, and this provided her with great comfort. It is clear that parents recognise ICs as fulfilling specific needs, be it just entertainment or companionship, or a coping mechanism for emotional difficulties experienced at that time, and are happy for the IC to perform these functions because it is perceived as beneficial for the child. Additionally, mothers interviewed as well as some IC parents from the questionnaire, indicated that ICs

can provide a useful teaching mechanism for children and are appreciated as such by parents.

5.1.3 RQ 3 – What concerns do parents have about ICs and what factors relate to parents' concern?

Parents in phase 1 reported some level of concern about ICs; however experience of ICs was found to relate to parents' level of concern, with parents who had experience of ICs in some way being significantly less concerned if at all. This again highlights the relationship between positive parent views and experience. NIC parents provided concerns centred around social and emotional difficulties and would be concerned about the impact that such a companion would have upon real life friendships, as well as the negative perceptions of peers that could lead to bullying and teasing. These findings lead me to question the general perception of ICs by those who have not as yet experienced them. Findings by Gleason (2002) indicate that children form relationships of a different nature with ICs compared to real life friends, and are able to recognise that their relationship is distinct from that of a real-life friend. This appeared to only be reflected in the views of parents who have experienced the phenomenon, who did not cite social difficulties or additionally fantasy/reality distinction as a concern, and who did not talk about their child having a lack of real life friendships or the IC having negative social implications. IC parents did however specifically state that they had no concerns *because* the child had a good social life and there had been no negative impact upon the child or their development of real life friends. It would therefore appear that this would have been a concern for them before they had experienced the phenomenon with their child, indicating a cultural view that children with ICs may be experiencing social difficulties.

It is however important to state that these parents were talking about children in the primary school years. Experience seemed less influential when it came to concerns regarding older children with ICs, and parents commonly cited their child's age to be a

particular concern regardless of experience. The interviews carried out in this study also identified age to be a key factor in the development of concerns regarding ICs, with the mothers having no concerns whilst the child was young but growing concerns as the child got older. Mothers commonly viewed ICs as both developmentally inappropriate for older children and uncommon. The stark contrast between the lack of concern that the mothers had about younger children with ICs and the deep concerns that they had about older children with ICs was striking and is further discussed in section 5.2.2.

This study highlighted that the views of parents whose children are typically developing may differ from those whose children have developmental disorders. One mother interviewed had a child with autism and for a brief discussion of how this affected her views and the wider concerns that she felt, see Appendix I.

5.2 Discussion of main findings

5.2.1 The effect of experience upon parent views of ICs

The most striking finding from this study is that parents with and without experience of ICs differ in their views of the phenomenon, with parents who have experience of ICs holding consistently more positive views. Parents with IC experience perceived more advantages, had fewer concerns, and would be more inclined to encourage and join in with the pretense. However, the relationship between experience and a positive view of ICs is unclear. Could it be that experience of the phenomenon causes a more positive view of it, or that parents who have already positive views of the phenomenon are merely those who are aware of their children's IC and whose views are captured?

The finding that experience positively shaped the views of the mothers interviewed indicates that the first suggestion is more likely; that is, experiencing the phenomenon in some way does in fact result in a more positive view of it. The majority of mothers indicated that their own personal experiences of ICs helped to alleviate any initial concerns and

positively shape their views and understanding of their child's behaviour. It was apparent that experience of the phenomenon was reassuring to these mothers. The finding that experiencing ICs and having the opportunity to observe the behaviour first hand caused their initial concerns to disappear, indicates the powerful effect of experience. The finding that some mothers required the experience of the phenomenon to alleviate their initial concerns does however suggest a level of concern about the phenomenon if it is not experienced in some way.

The need for experience to better understand ICs and shape the views of parents resonates with principles of the contact hypothesis suggested by Allport (1954). Allport (1954) claims that prejudice directly results from generalisations and oversimplifications made about an entire group of people based on incomplete or mistaken information. The basic rationale of the contact hypothesis is therefore that prejudice may be reduced as more about the group of people is learned. This is achieved through direct contact with the group, in which beliefs are changed. Rothbart and John (1985) suggest that an individual's beliefs can be modified by coming into contact with a culturally distinct group member who changes the beliefs about the group as a whole. When considered in accordance with this study, I suggest that NIC parents require contact with a child who has an IC in order to modify their pre-existing cultural beliefs about children with ICs; thus resulting in the phenomenon being viewed more positively. IC parents may therefore have more positive views because they have had the experience, been in contact with children with ICs, and therefore modified their beliefs accordingly.

The powerful effect of experience may also result from the lack of information available to parents about the phenomenon, thus emphasising why contact is important for understanding. Pearson et al. (2001) suggest that given the high number of children found to have ICs in their study, they should be assumed to be part of mainstream child development.

Why is it the case therefore that the mothers interviewed in this study talked about ICs rarely being talked about amongst parents and there being a lack of information about ICs in parenting books? It would appear that until a parent experiences the phenomenon with their child and actively looks it up, information about ICs is not readily available. Why is there not more information available about ICs and why are parents not talking to each other about them? Despite a high proportion of children having an IC, the fact that not all children have them may in fact result in some stigma being attached, thus fuelling a negative cultural perception of ICs and resulting in parents being cautious of talking about them. Cultural uncertainty about ICs appears to prevail, and parents seem fearful of appearing "unusual" or their child being viewed in such a way. Children with ICs are on the whole thought of as in the minority, and increasingly so with growing age when fantasy play is viewed as inappropriate, and this provides further indication as to why experience of the phenomenon is so important in providing an understanding of it. Without detailed information about ICs being available to parents, their only means for gaining insight into it is through experiencing it. One mother informed me, *"So you know it's not a general child development thing…We've read loads about early years and what development means for 3 to 5 and it never comes up on any of those agendas…I definitely think that you know the guide books should say have a chapter on imaginary friends, just to put parents' minds at rest."* Another mother also said, "*I mean people don't talk about imaginary friends. That was why I was really interested when I saw your thing. Because I was like nobody ever talks about it."* Once an IC appears in a child's life, parents appear to carry out research into them and the mothers interviewed talked about the research that they had done into ICs as a result of experiencing the phenomenon with their child as helping to positively shape their views. Without the experience of them however, there is little information out there for parents, perhaps leading to social stigma being attached to the phenomenon.

It appears that when parents experience ICs with their children, they go through a process in which they re-think their initial attitudes. For some mothers in this study, ICs were perceived as simply part of young child development and nothing to be concerned about, whereas others had initial concerns. Their initial thoughts, which may have been apparent before the experience or triggered by the onset of the experience, include concerns about their child's social and emotional well-being; that there must be something so awful happening in their life that they require the coping mechanism of an IC. They look back and question the adequacy of their own parenting, question events that may have led to their child's creation of an IC, and project to concerns about the child being bullied because of the IC and the perceptions of others in society. Some parents then seek advice from books and the internet, whilst others speak to family members who have experienced ICs with their own children, and others simply go along with the behaviour and see what comes of it. In all these cases, it appears that the process involved in experiencing the IC alleviates the initial concerns, and gaining more information about ICs and observing their child as being typically developing, happy and sociable leads to a positive view and insight of the phenomenon that they may not have had should their child never have created one.

The relationship between experience and parent views of ICs was also apparent when it came to their views on IC engagement during different stages in a child's development. IC parents and parents who had ICs when they were younger were less likely to mind their child engaging with an IC during all stages of childhood and adolescence than parents without such experience. Although parents with experience of ICs' concern still grew as the age of the child increased, and they would also very much mind their child having an IC in adolescence, the extent to which they minded was significantly less. I would suggest that if parents who have experience of ICs consistently hold more positive views than parents without experience, the phenomenon of ICs can generally be assumed to be beneficial for children and certainly not harmful as indicated by Hurlock (1972).

The findings of this study provide an important insight into the views of parents regarding ICs. Parents who have experience of ICs have consistently more positive views about the behaviour than parents without such experience. This supports the claim of Svendsen (1934) that mothers who had experienced the phenomenon with their child were less likely to regard it as harmful than mothers who had never encountered it. The findings from the interviews in this study suggest that experience positively shapes views and I would suggest that parents find having had an IC when they were younger or experiencing ICs with their own children as reassuring of the normality of the phenomenon. From the interviews with mothers, in all but one case, experience told the parents that ICs were on the whole inert, harmless, and just a 'quirk'. It is therefore important that future research into parent views of ICs differentiates between those who have experienced the phenomenon and those who have not.

5.2.2 The effect of child age upon parent views of ICs

Whilst experience of ICs seems to be key to parents' understanding, the findings of this study indicate that all parents' views of ICs negatively correlate with the age of the child. Findings from phase 1 indicated that the degree of acceptance of all parents of their children having ICs declined with increasing child age. Parents were/would be happy for their child to have an IC in infancy and early childhood, but became increasingly less happy about it as their child entered middle childhood and beyond, with fairly neutral views stated regarding middle childhood and negative views regarding late childhood, early adolescence and adolescence. All parents indicated that they would very much mind their child having an IC above the age of 10 years old. These findings are consistent with past research that older children keep their ICs a secret from others, in particular parents (e.g. Hoff, 2004-2005; Majors, 2009).

Majors (2009) suggested that ICs are kept a secret by older children as a result of parental/cultural disapproval. The findings of the present study provide some evidence for

Majors' hypothesis. Taylor (1999) found that parents' enjoyment of their child's fantasy can give way to concern if the child continues to engage with it beyond an age that they deem appropriate, and that parents do not tend to discuss their children's companions for fear of actively encouraging them. Taylor suggests that in middle childhood, when children may become aware of others' responses to their ICs, it is quite common for such activities to go "underground". In addition to the views expressed in phase 1 of the study, ICs were viewed by the mothers interviewed as being a phenomenon typical only of young children, and as inappropriate for an older child. They felt that a child should grow out of them and if they do not it is a sign that there is perhaps something socially or emotionally remiss with the child. The mothers were firm in their beliefs that ICs are inappropriate for older children, and I would suggest that older children are picking up on these views that represent the general societal view, thus resulting in them choosing to keep their ICs private from those around them.

Despite fathers holding slightly more positive views than mothers in terms of their general encouragement, involvement and acceptance of their child's IC, the reverse was apparent when it came to the different ages of the child in which the IC may still be in existence. Mothers were slightly less likely to mind their child engaging with an IC in infancy, early and late childhood, early adolescence, and adolescence. Haight et al (1997) and Lindsey and Mize (2001) found that fathers' views of pretend play negatively correlate with the age of the child. As the child gets older, fathers have been found to grow more concerned about their child's involvement in pretend play and to therefore put greater limits on it (Haight et al, 1997) and reduce their involvement (Lindsey & Mize, 2001). If, as Gleason (2005) suggests, fathers value most the social aspects of ICs more than mothers, the finding that fathers are less accepting of ICs than mothers with increasing child age is consistent with this view. Fathers may be more focussed on the social implications of the child having

an IC with increasing age and given that ICs may be socially unaccepted in later childhood and beyond this may go some way in explaining why they have more negative views.

The finding that parents would have more concerns about an older child with an IC again leads me to question the influence of experience given that all the parents in this study were of primary school children. Some of the mothers interviewed identified having initial concerns about the IC which were soon alleviated through experiencing the child as happy and sociable, and observing the supportive nature of the IC. Would their concerns about an older child with an IC reduce if they were to actually experience their child having one at a later age? It would appear from this study that parents are unaware of the commonness of ICs in older children, resulting in a feeling that there must be something deficient or worrying about a child with an IC in middle childhood and beyond. In her study of three 11-year old girls, Majors (2009) identified the ICs of these older children as having a supportive role with regard to developing confidence, supporting with bullying and friendship difficulties, and having someone to listen to in confidence as a good alternative to parents. Given that parents in the present study who had experience of ICs identified them as positive for child development, would they perceive the IC of an older child as providing the developmental benefits suggested by Majors if they were to experience it, thus resulting in a more positive perception? Whilst parents might notice some benefits of an IC for an older child if they were to experience it, there remains a cultural view that ICs in older children are inappropriate. Although ICs in older children have been found to help with bullying (Majors, 2009), there is a concern amongst parents that these children or adolescents may become a target for bullying because they are seen as socially different. This could lead to social isolation, something that no parent would want for their child at a time when social life is so important for the development of confidence and identity. There are cultural and social implications for an older child with an IC, which were apparent in the views expressed by parents in this study who were concerned about potential negative

perceptions of other children and adults. I would suggest that until there is a cultural shift in perception around the ICs of older children, parents will continue to have concerns. As a result, parents feel that a more appropriate supportive framework for an older child comes from talking to real-life peers and parents as opposed to an IC, and they worry as to the nature of the child's difficulties if they choose the support of the IC as opposed to the parent.

5.2.3 Conditional acceptance of children's ICs

The finding that parents were most inclined to ignore their child interacting with their IC leads to questions around their acceptance of the phenomenon. If they are happy for their child to have an IC, and perceive it as being advantageous to the child, why show caution about encouraging it? Insight into this may be provided by the finding that parents surveyed and mothers interviewed showed conditional positivity towards their child having an IC. The majority of the mothers interviewed held very positive views regarding ICs, stating a number of advantages for them and their child, few concerns, and a high level of enjoyment and entertainment for all the family. All mothers indicated that their acceptance of the IC was however conditional upon the child being a young age, and the majority also indicated that their acceptance was conditional upon the appropriate use of the IC, and it not impacting upon the child's development of real life friends. This indicates that parents do perhaps have underlying worries about ICs even if they do perceive them positively, which may explain why they are most inclined to ignore the behaviour.

Bomford (2011) also found parents in her study to have conditional acceptance of their children's ICs, focused around the age of the child and their ability to distinguish fantasy from reality. Some mothers in the present study also alluded to the importance of the child understanding their IC to be pretend. This was less important to the mothers whilst the child was very young, but more important as the child grew older. All the children were however said to be aware that their IC was "pretend", and as a result the mothers never spoke of any concern that the fantasy/reality distinction was blurred. This confirms the

findings of Taylor (1999) and Davis (2006) that typically developing children appear to be aware of the imaginary status of their companion. Gopnik (2009a) suggested that it is the inability of parents and adults to understand the viewpoint of the child regarding their skills in distinguishing fantasy from reality that contributes to the common view that children with ICs are unable to do so. The mothers interviewed all had experience of ICs with their children and had therefore experienced first hand their child's ability to understand the IC as pretend, and it may therefore be parents who do not have this experience who commonly misunderstand the viewpoint of the child as suggested by Gopnik (2009a).

The finding that mothers interviewed were happy for their child to have an IC so long as there was no negative impact upon their social interaction with peers, and no substitution of real life friends is indicative of parents' caution around the real life social status of their child. The mothers however expressed no concerns that their children lacked real life friends or were less socially accepted than other children. These reports from parents lend support to current research findings that children with ICs are no less socially accepted than peers (Gleason, 2004). The fact that the mothers' positivity about their children's ICs was dependent for some upon their having good real life social relationships does perhaps suggest an underlying cultural attitude that children with ICs experience social difficulties. The social skills of children with ICs seems to be at the forefront of parents' minds, and may be a result of the cultural view that children with ICs experience some degree of social difficulties: a view that perhaps stems from early research into the characteristics of children experiencing the phenomenon (e.g. Ames & Learned, 1946; Nagera, 1969). Whilst parents are positive with regard to their children's engagement with ICs, I would suggest that the underlying cultural attitudes regarding children with ICs mean that parents are continually alert to any negative impact of the IC and are continually looking for signs that their child is developing appropriately.

5.2.4 The relationship between religion and parent views of ICs

Despite this study being carried out in a diverse north London borough, the majority of parents who completed the questionnaire were White British. This study therefore examined the influence of religion upon the views of parents about ICs to explore the relationship between inter-cultural factors and views of ICs. Carlson et al. (1998) suggest that religious ideology is an aspect of the cultural context that results in varied attitudes towards pretend play, and Taylor and Carlson (2000) suggest that the reactions of adults towards children's fantasy play is influenced by religious beliefs.

The majority of parents who completed the questionnaire were Christian (65%), with the rest of the sample consisting of Jewish parents (25%) and parents from "other" religions (10%) including Islam, Hinduism and Humanism. There was some variation in the views of parents from these different religious faiths. Past research indicates that parents facilitate pretend play in accordance with their cultural beliefs regarding its appropriateness and value for their child (Gleason, 2005; Taylor & Carlson, 2000). These beliefs may be reflected in the views of parents from the different religious groups, with Jewish parents perhaps placing slightly more importance on the academic and social life of their child, being less accepting of the IC appearing in school or at a friend's house. Jewish parents felt that there were significantly more advantages of the IC for their child than parents from the group of "other" religions, and were more likely to mind their child playing with their IC at school than Christian parents. Furthermore, Jewish parents were found to be more likely to mind their child playing with their IC at a friend's house than Christian parents, and Christian and Jewish parents were more likely to join in with the pretense of the IC privately at home than parents from the group of "other religions". Parents from all the religious faiths were however more likely to join in with the pretense in private than in public.

These findings suggest that parents within specific religious cultures may value ICs differently. For example, parents within the Jewish culture may merit the educational and

developmental benefits of the IC but be cautious about it appearing in social circles, indicative of a possible feeling of social taboo associated with the IC and caution with regard to its social implications for the child. This may provide some insight into their cultural beliefs around the value of IC play and its appropriateness in certain contexts. The belief that ICs have a number of advantages for a child may indicate why Jewish and Christian parents are willing to join in and perhaps encourage the play privately at home but be more cautious of doing so in public or in front of others. Furthermore, some intra-cultural variation in views was apparent with Jewish parents reporting there to be more advantages of an IC for boys than girls compared to parents from the other religions, perhaps indicating their own cultural values as to the benefit of such play. These views may be indicative of the educational and developmental benefits they associate with having an IC, which are perhaps more culturally important for sons than daughters. Despite some difference found amongst the views of parents from different religions, in general parents from all religious faiths in this study held overall somewhat neutral and similar attitudes about ICs; however given that parents from religions other than Christianity and Judaism were under-represented, further investigation as to the relationship between religion and parent views of ICs is required.

Despite being set in a multi-cultural context, this study had a predominantly White British sample. Within many western-middle class families, children are strongly encouraged by parents to become involved in fantasy play and it is considered to be beneficial to the child (Göncü & Gaskins, 2007), and findings from this study are consistent with this view. Parents in this study held mainly positive views about their children's engagement with ICs. It is however important to note that this study was carried out within a very specific context, a north London borough. Whilst the majority of parents were White British, London is a diverse, cosmopolitan and liberal city, and the parents in this study may as a result represent the 'culturally cultivated play' community. If this study were carried out in a more rural and

less diverse context in which social class and ethnicity were more homogenous, the views of White British parents may have been different.

5.3 Strengths and limitations of the study and future directions

This study offers a unique insight into a relatively unexplored aspect of ICs: the attitudes of parents. Whilst other studies have looked at gaining an understanding of parents' views of ICs and pretend play, little focus has been placed on understanding the factors that relate to their views. The finding that experience relates to parent views of ICs highlights the importance of examining the views of IC and NIC parents separately, which this study does.

Through the use of questionnaires, phase 1 of this study gained the views of a high number of parents, both mothers and fathers of both boys and girls from different religions. This meant that both inter- and intra-cultural factors could be examined. Through the use of both open- and closed-ended questions, the views of parents could be gained and in-depth information regarding these views obtained. This provided further understanding of the nature of their views and the experiences that led to the formation of them. This phase of the study allowed for an understanding of both IC and NIC parents' views to be gained and a comparison of these views to be carried out.

Whilst some studies have surveyed parent views of ICs, few studies have used qualitative methods to gain a more in-depth understanding of parents' attitudes. Phase 2 of the study did just this, and through the use of semi-structured interviews with mothers who have experienced the phenomenon, a greater understanding of their views and the experiences that led to the formation of their views was obtained. The use of a mixed methodology in this study allowed for the lack of in-depth information from the questionnaires to be compensated for by the interviews and the small sample of mothers

interviewed to be offset by the high number of participants who completed the questionnaire.

In addition, previous studies into ICs tended to use a pre-school population. Given that recent research indicates older children create ICs that are kept secret from parents, it is important to also gain the views of parents of older children. This study used a population of parents of primary school children ranging from 3- to 11-years old and parents spoke about children who created ICs as late as 8-years old and which disappeared as late as 9-years old. This study therefore provides a better insight into the phenomenon of ICs, given that they are not unique to pre-school children.

There are, however, a number of limitations to the present study that need to be identified. Firstly, this study sought the views of parents regarding their children's ICs; however the majority of participants were mothers. Only a small number of fathers volunteered to participate in this study. It may therefore be the case that the views of parents in this study are more reflective of mothers than parents in general. Research indicates that mothers engage in and facilitate more pretend play than fathers (e.g. Roopnarine & Mounts, 1985), which may be indicative of their views regarding its appropriateness. Furthermore, research also indicates that mothers and fathers may value pretend play for different reasons (Gleason, 2005), with mothers placing greater value on the cognitive and educational implications and fathers more value its entertainment value. This further indicates the need to explore the views of both parent genders if we are to fully understand the views of parents regarding ICs. Future research in this area should aim to gain the views of a larger sample of fathers, as well as the in-depth views of fathers just as this study did with mothers.

Secondly, cultural factors have been found to impact upon the views of parents regarding their children's ICs (e.g. Taylor, Miner et al, 2004; Farver & Howes, 1993). This

study attempted to examine cultural factors influencing parents' views; however despite carrying out the research in a multi-cultural and diverse London borough, the majority of parents were White British and Christian. Whilst the study captured some difference in views between religions, in particular Jewish parents and those from other religions, few religions were represented and in some cases with very small numbers, preventing firm conclusions from being drawn. The influence of culture and inter-cultural variation in parents' attitudes to ICs is an important aspect of the phenomenon that needs to be explored, and future research should examine the views of parents with differing ethnicity, socio-economic status and religion to again provide greater insight into their views.

Furthermore, age was clearly a factor that affects the views of parents regarding ICs. This study provided further evidence that older children may be keeping their ICs a secret from others because of perceived parental disapproval. Given that experience was found to be a major factor in the positive views of parents, it could be said that examining the views of parents whose older children have ICs would be of benefit as experiencing the phenomenon with an older child may again affect views. There are however difficulties with carrying out such research, given that older children tend to keep their ICs a secret. It may be that future research examining parent attitudes towards older children having ICs is carried out through accounts from older children of why they have kept their IC secret, what they anticipated the reactions of parents to be and if parents did become aware of them, what their reactions were.

Finally, mothers who were interviewed identified a number of purposes they felt their children's ICs served. Parents look for reasons as to why their child may create an IC, perhaps stemming from the fact that not all children create them. Future research should therefore look at examining the purposes that parents feel the ICs serve their children, as this will again provide greater insight into the phenomenon.

5.3.1 Generalisation of findings

Mayring (2007) defines and outlines the theory and process of generalization and the limits to generalising research findings, particularly those from qualitative studies. Whilst Mayring highlights the potential limits to generalisation, he emphasises it to have great importance to research. The present study stands within a social constructionist point of view and the generalisability of the research findings must be considered in this view. From a social constructionist position, all phenomena are time and context specific and whilst we seek similarities of individual perspectives, the arguments can be taken as only time and context specific (Mayring, 2007). The views gained in this study were of predominantly White British mothers, and the consistency of views supports the generalisation of them to the wider White British population of parents at this specific time and within this specific context.

As has been previously discussed in Chapter 3, the problem of generalising results from traditional quantitative social research is discussed under the concept of external validity (Mayring, 2007). That is, would the same result be found under a different set of circumstances (Safarino, 2005)? As outlined in Chapter 3, measures were taken to make the process of data collection and analysis explicit, and careful consideration was given to the methods used. This provided the initial basis to the results of the study being legitimately generalizable. Schulz (2004) argues for generalisation through comparative literature analysis in which we can look for similar studies to compare our results with. The findings of Phase 1 of this study are in line with previous studies carried out by Brooks and Knowles (1982) and Gleason (2005) in other Western communities. These studies carried out in the US found no statistically significant differences in the views of mothers and fathers regarding children's ICs, and no statistically significant differences in the views expressed for boys and girls. Both studies did however find that parents consistently held more positive views

regarding daughters interacting with ICs than they held for boys, and such findings were also apparent in this study. Furthermore, the findings of this study support those of Manosevitz et al (1973), who found that the majority of IC parents in their study held positive views regarding ICs and would be very unlikely to actively discourage the behaviour. Given the similar findings of these studies to the present one, I argue that the findings of this study can therefore be legitimately generalised to the wider Western population of parents, and can be taken to be reflective of the general views of parents within Western societies at this time in history.

The nature of qualitative research often allows for only a small sample of participants (Mayring, 2007). Whilst Phase 2 of the study identified the in-depth views of mothers who had experienced the phenomenon with their children, it is recognised that the findings from a study of this size cannot be generalised in an empirical sense. Moreover, the qualitative findings of Phase 2 of this study contribute to the development of theory which can be used at a conceptual level. The generalisation of this study can therefore be best understood as being at a theoretical level (Smith & Eatough, 2006). According to Smith and Eatough (2006), researchers can think about theoretical as opposed to empirical generalisability, in which theoretical propositions can be refined and modified through comparison with other cases, other conceptual claims in the existing literature, and the personal and professional experience of the researcher or reader. The strength of the study is then evaluated in terms of the insights it gives regarding the topic under investigation (Majors, 2009). Previous to this study, there had been little qualitative investigation of parent views of ICs, and through the use of interviews and thematic analysis, rich data on parents' views and experiences of their children's ICs has been collected, thus contributing to the development of theory on this topic and making a distinct contribution to the research into ICs.

The two phases of this study do not however simply stand alone, but are used to support the understanding of the results of each phase through comparisons of the similarities and differences between findings. When considering the mixed methods approach of this study, the triangulation of research methods also supports the generalisability of the findings. Denzin (1970) defined triangulation in terms of the combination or integration of several studies to come to more secure and more general results. Through the use of interviews with parents who also completed questionnaires, more accurate and generalisable results were obtained and additional understanding of findings was gained.

5.4 Implications of findings for educational psychology, education and childcare professionals

The EP profession is experiencing change, and the role and future directions of Educational Psychology Services are being re-examined (Farrell, 2010; Jimerson et al,. 2006). It is vital that the EP profession responds to changes in the structures and systems within society so that their knowledge and expertise can be applied to benefit children, young people, their families and schools (Farrell, 2010). This research and other recent studies (e.g. Pearson et al., 2001) highlight the relatively high prevalence of ICs in children's lives, and these imaginary friendships and their impact on child development and family life needs to be better understood and acknowledged by EPs. According to Bomford (2011), the parents' perspective on ICs offers not only an insight into their observations of their children's interactions over time but also conveys how they make sense of their child's relationship with his or her IC in isolation and in the broader context of the outside world. This study gives an insight into the experiences of both parents and children with ICs, and helps professionals to understand how parents come to develop their views on the behaviour. This will go some way in supporting EPs and teachers to understand better how parents may view the IC behaviour of their child and why.

A key role of an EP is in supporting parents to understand the needs of their children and the behaviours that they display through evidence-based research and psychological understanding (Farrell et al., 2006; Stobie et al., 2002). EPs are therefore expected to have a good understanding of all aspects of child development. The phenomenon of ICs has received little attention in the EP profession. Given that ICs have been found to have significance for cognitive, social and emotional development and parents acknowledge such significance, better knowledge and understanding of not only ICs, but also the development of imagination, imaginary phenomena, and pretend play is required if they are to be in a position to support parents' understanding of their children's behaviour. Parents may require support from EPs to understand the relationship between their child and their IC, the function of the behaviour, and to be able to recognise when and if the behaviour is worrying.

An important view that came to light from the interviews in this study is a feeling amongst parents that there is a lack of information readily available to them about children's ICs, with particular emphasis on a lack of information in parenting books or books about general child development. This lack of information may be contributing to the societal perception of ICs as atypical, leading to some stigma being attached to the behaviour. Moreover, the lack of information about ICs that is available to parents means that until the phenomenon is experienced, parents' awareness of it and its implications are limited. It would therefore benefit both parents and children for childcare and parenting guides to provide information on ICs, thus portraying it as a key part of child development and reducing the stigma or worry that may be attached to it. This would go some way in further shifting the cultural perception of ICs within society towards being viewed positively and would support parents to understand the behaviour better when the IC suddenly appears in the child's life.

This study highlighted the potential for parents of children with developmental disorders to have additional concerns about ICs. Majors (2009) recommends that future research into ICs should consider the purposes that they serve children with autism and Down's Syndrome. Such research may support parents whose children have developmental disorders to understand the reasons for their children having ICs, and could go some way in supporting them to understand the behaviour. EPs are well placed to carry out this research. Furthermore, parents of children with developmental difficulties and special educational needs may require a higher level of support in managing and understanding the IC behaviour of their children. Education and childcare professionals should be mindful of this and be available to offer support to parents in containing their concerns around the IC behaviour.

In collaboration with reviewed literature, my research findings provide evidence of the positive and negative views of parents, why they have such views, and the experiences that they have had with ICs. It is important that this research is therefore made accessible to parents, teachers and child care workers to support their understanding of ICs, alleviate any concerns about the behaviour, and support how and whether they approach the topic with parents. Information could be shared through child development workshops and training, leaflets, online parent forums and websites, media interviews, and magazine features.

Research carried out by Majors (2009) challenges some of the less positive views of ICs in older children, such as these children being lonely, lacking friends or being strange. In her study, Majors stated a hope that as a consequence of her research, over time school aged children with imaginary companions would receive a respectful and sympathetic response from others based on knowledge and understanding. However, it is apparent from my research that parents still hold a negative view of ICs in older children, and further awareness of positive aspects of ICs in older children needs to be facilitated in parents.

Research into ICs needs to be made more accessible to parents, education and childcare professionals.

Bomford (2011) suggests that to further understand parent views of ICs, cultural influences upon parent views must be explored, and Taylor and Carlson (2000) found differing attitudes towards ICs according to religion. This study provides some support for this, with parents from different religions showing varying views regarding the benefits afforded to the child, particularly with regard to different contexts. EPs, teachers and childcare professionals need to be sensitive to cultural views of ICs and be aware of which cultural groups of parents may be less accepting of their child's IC. I would suggest that further exploration in this area is needed for professionals to be in the best possible position for supporting parents from different cultures to understand their children's imaginary play behaviours.

Hill (2013) summarises how the recent rebranding of many educational psychology services reflects the profession taking control of its future through the application of a range of applied psychologies offered to meet the needs of diverse populations of children and their families. The current EP doctorate training promotes a shift to EPs delivering more therapeutic-based interventions, with play being one key aspect of this. Through the reports from parents in this study about how ICs are used and the advantages they perceive them to have, this research has highlighted the importance of imaginative play in terms of providing a means for children to learn and develop, explore emotions, find comfort, make sense of experiences and self-entertain. This research could be applied to support the development of therapeutic interventions for children based on the knowledge acquired through parents' views of children's ICs.

Finally, the rationale for this research came from a professional dilemma, as described in Chapter 1. On a personal level, this study shaped my understanding and actions

as an EP involved with the case of the young girl whose IC was kept private from her parents. Through carrying out this research, I felt confident to support the young girl to understand how her parents may feel about the IC and to make her own decision to tell them about it. I further understood the need to be available to the parents to talk about any concerns they may have had, and felt well placed to share other parents' experiences with them. I hope that other EPs find the same level of support from this study should a similar case arise.

5.5 Conclusion

Research into ICs is in its infancy. This study has provided an initial insight into the views of parents regarding children's ICs and the factors that relate to their views. Findings indicate that parents hold mainly positive views about ICs, although caution is evident in parents' willingness to encourage the phenomenon with their children, choosing most often to merely ignore the behaviour and let it continue without encouragement or discouragement on the part of the parent.

There are a number of factors that appear to relate to parent views of ICs. The most evident factor was experience of ICs, mainly in the form of experience of them with a child but also in the form of the parent having one when they were younger. Parents who had these types of experience consistently indicated more positive views of the phenomenon when surveyed. Furthermore, interviews with mothers indicated that experience results in more positive views of ICs.

Another major finding of this study was that the age of the child also has a profound effect upon the views of parents. The finding that parents become less accepting of ICs beyond the age of 7-years lends support to the notion that older children may be keeping their ICs secret because of parental and cultural disapproval. Whilst parents may hold quite positive views about ICs, they are cautious of the views of others, particularly with regard to

age. There are cultural expectations about what is appropriate behaviour at different ages and parents are aware of those expectations. They deem ICs as uncommon and inappropriate for older children, and worry that they are a sign of underlying social and emotional difficulties. It would appear that ICs are deemed by parents as part of a developmental continuum; they see them as an appropriate, and even clever, coping mechanism which supports development in the early years but feel that children should grow out of them and learn new strategies for coping such as using real life peers and family in later childhood.

Whilst the majority of parents held positive views about ICs, their acceptance of them was conditional upon a number of factors, most notably age, the appropriate use of the IC and the child having good real life relationships with peers and others. It would therefore appear that whilst parents are happy for their child to have an IC, and recognise a number of developmental benefits for the child, there are conditions placed upon their acceptance of the phenomenon.

Furthermore, parents recognised the companionship that the IC offered the child and were pleased that their child was able to draw on their IC to entertain themselves. Parents whose children had an IC relished the entertainment and dialogue that the IC facilitated and they talked fondly about their children's ICs. There were some differences in the views of parents from different religions and further exploration of cultural influences upon parents' views of ICs is needed if parents' views are to be fully understood.

As indicated in previous research, parents facilitate play according to their beliefs about its appropriateness for their child, and it is clear that parents do not see ICs as appropriate play for older children despite them being shown to serve a number of beneficial purposes to their creators. Above all, as experience was found to be such an

important factor in the views of parents, the phenomenon of imaginary companions may be one that needs to be experienced by parents in order to be fully understood.

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Appendices

Appendix A

Literature search

The search for literature, including books, journal and dissertations, involved the use of electronic databases supplying indexes and abstracts such as the British Education Index, PsycINFO, PsychARTICLES, ERIC and Google Scholar. Areas searched included psychological theory on imaginary companions and pretend play, developmental psychology on imaginary companions and pretend play, parents' attitudes to pretend play and imaginary companions, sociocultural theory, cultural views of play, and children's social, emotional and cognitive development. Furthermore, literature on mixed methods approaches to research and qualitative and quantitative methods was also investigated. Key terms used to find literature for this study included imaginary companions, pretend/fantasy play, parent attitudes, cultural views, and imaginative play.

Key texts used for gaining references to follow up for this study were Marjorie Taylor's (1999) "*Imaginary companions and the children who create them*", Karen Major's (2009) "*Children's Imaginary Companions and the Purposes They Serve: An Interpretative Phenomenological Analysis",* and Eva Hoff's (2004-2005) "*A friend living inside me – the forms and functions of imaginary companions".* These texts and the searches carried out allowed for the majority of studies into children's imaginary companions to be found, and studies with greatest relevance to parent attitudes towards the phenomenon and cultural influences upon pretend play and ICs, as well as those whose outcomes were thought to have possible influences upon parents' views or their understanding of the phenomenon were selected for review.

Appendix B

Table 1 - Summary of principles for questionnaire construction

Principle 1	*Ensure that questionnaire items fulfil the research objectives*
Principle 2	*Understand the research population*
Principle 3	*Use familiar and jargon-free language*
Principle 4	*Develop question items that are simple, clear and precise*
Principle 5	*Do not use 'leading' or 'loaded' questions*
Principle 6	*Avoid double-barrelled questions*
Principle 7	*Avoid questions containing double negatives*
Principle 8	*Determine whether a closed or open ended question is needed*
Principle 9	*Use mutually exclusive and exhaustive response categories for closed ended questions*
Principle 10	*Give consideration to the various types of response categories available for closed ended question items*
Principle 11	*Use multiple question items to measure more abstract constructs*
Principle 12	*Ensure that the questionnaire developed is easy for the participant to understand and complete*
Principle 13	*Always pilot-test the questionnaire*

(Adapted from Tashakkori & Teddlie, 2003)

Appendix C

Sample questionnaire and cover letter

Leading education and social research
Institute of Education
University of London

Dear Parent/Carer,

I am currently in my final year of doctorate training to become an Educational Psychologist at the Institute of Education, University of London. In order to complete my doctorate, I must undertake an extended piece of research and I have chosen to look at children's imaginary friends. Whilst there is emerging research into the functions and characteristics of imaginary friends and the children who create them, there is very little research into how parents view and experience the phenomenon. I have therefore chosen to explore **parent views on children's imaginary friends** (sometimes referred to as 'imaginary companions').

Enclosed is a short questionnaire for you to complete. It is not necessary for your child to have an imaginary friend for you to participate in this research – I want the views of all parents. I would love to hear from mothers, fathers or both parents/carers, so please feel free to use different coloured pens if more than one person is responding, with a note to tell me who which colour represents.

Completing the questionnaire should take no longer than 8 - 10 minutes.

- **Parents of children without imaginary friends should complete section 1 and the last page only.**
- **Parents of children who currently have or previously had an imaginary friend should complete section 2 and the last page only.**

Information you provide will only be used for the purpose of this research and will be used towards improving the understanding of the phenomenon of imaginary friends.

You do not have to give your name, and the information you provide will remain confidential and anonymous. Where information or quotes are included in research reports, they will not be identifiable as yours and all the information you provide will be viewed without judgement.

Please complete the questionnaire, place it into the envelope provided and seal it, and either return it to the school office or ask your child to give it to their class teacher. **Please return questionnaires by Monday 22nd October.**

Please note that if your child does have an imaginary friend, it is not necessary to ask them for details of it – I just want *your* views!

Thank you so much for taking the time to participate in this research – I can't tell you how much I appreciate it and the extent to which you will be helping me to get my doctorate. I will be feeding back my findings to the head teacher and you will be able to read about them in a short newsletter.

Regards,

Sophie Sugarman

School of Psychology and Human Development
Institute of Education, University of London
25 Woburn Square
London WC1H 0AA
ssugarman@ioe.ac.uk

Parent views about imaginary friends

Imaginary friends may be:

- **Completely invisible** friends which a child plays with and who may accompany the child and family on activities. The child may regularly report to others what the playmate has been up to.
- **Personified objects** in which a special toy or a stuffed animal is given their own personality/independence and who 'talk to' and play with the child.
- **Imaginary worlds** in which the child gives a detailed description of this different world, which may include its own people, animals, flags and language.

Section 1: For parents/carers of children without imaginary friends

If you are aware of your child currently having or previously having an imaginary friend, please complete the next section (section 2) instead.

1. Do you remember yourself having an imaginary friend when younger?

Yes		No	

2. Have you had previous experience of imaginary friends with any of your other children?

Yes		No		n/a	

3. To what extent do you feel there are advantages or disadvantages for a child having an imaginary friend? (Please circle a number)

Distinct advantages						**Distinct disadvantages**
1	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**	**6**	**7**

4. To what extent would you be concerned if your child did have an imaginary friend? (Please circle a number)

Not at all concerned						**Highly concerned**
1	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**	**6**	**7**

Please feel free to write additional comments relating to questions 3 and 4 in the box below:

5. I would mind my child playing with an imaginary friend during: (Please circle one rating for each age)

	Not at all				Very much
Infancy (1 - 3 years old)	**1**	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**
Early childhood (4 - 6 years old)	**1**	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**
Middle childhood (7 - 9 years old)	**1**	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**
Late childhood (10 - 12 years old)	**1**	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**
Early Adolescence (13 - 15 years old)	**1**	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**
Adolescence (16 – 21 years old)	**1**	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**

6. If your child were to have an imaginary friend at their current age, to what extent would these statements apply to you? (Please tick just one for each statement)

	Never	Sometimes	Often	Always
a) I would encourage my child to play with their imaginary friend				
b) I would discourage my child from playing with their imaginary friend				
c) I would ignore my child playing with their imaginary friend				
d) I would mind my child playing with their imaginary friend in front of adults and other parents				
f) I would get embarrassed if my child played with their imaginary friend in front of other parents				
g) I would get embarrassed if my child played with their imaginary friend in front of other children				
h) I would join in with the pretense of my child's imaginary friend e.g. by setting a place at the dinner table for them				
j) I would join in with the pretense of my child's imaginary friend privately at home				
k) I would join in with the pretense of my child's imaginary friend when out in public or in front of other adults				
l) I would mind my child playing with their imaginary friend at school				
m) I would mind my child playing with their imaginary friend whilst at a friend's house				

Please feel free to add any further views or comments in the box below:

Please now complete the last page (page 7)

Section 2: For parents/carers of children with imaginary friends

If you are aware of your child having or previously having an imaginary friend, please fill out this section.

Imaginary friends may take the following forms:

- **Completely invisible** friends which a child plays with and who may accompany the child and family on activities. The child may regularly report to others what the playmate has been up to.
- **Personified objects** in which a special toy or a stuffed animal is given their own personality/independence and who 'talk to' and play with the child.
- **Imaginary worlds** in which the child gives a detailed description of this different world, which may include it's own people, animals, flags and language.

1. How many imaginary friends has your child had?

Some children have more than one imaginary friend, or their imaginary friend may change over time, so please answer questions 2 - 5 about their most recent imaginary friend.

2. Is/was their imaginary friend: (please tick)

Completely invisible?	
A personified object?	
An imaginary world?	

3. If known, what is/was the gender of their imaginary friend?

4. If known, what is/was the age of their imaginary friend?

5. At what age did your child create their most recent imaginary friend?

6. Does your child still engage with any of their imaginary friends? (Please tick one)

Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often

If never, at what age did they disappear?

7. Do you remember yourself having an imaginary friend when younger?

Yes		No	

8. Are you aware of any of your child's close friends having imaginary friends?

Yes		No	

9. Does/did your child talk to you about their imaginary friends? (Please tick one)

Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often

10. Do/did you ask your child questions about their imaginary friends? (Please tick one)

Never	Rarely	Sometimes	Often

11. Have you had previous experience of imaginary friends with any of your other children?

Yes		No		n/a	

12. To what extent do you feel there are advantages or disadvantages for your child having an imaginary friend? (Please circle a number)

Distinct advantages						**Distinct disadvantages**
1	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**	**6**	**7**

13. To what extent do you feel any concern about your child having an imaginary friend? (Please circle a number)

Not at all concerned						**Highly concerned**
1	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**	**6**	**7**

Please feel free to write additional comments relating to questions 12 and 13 in the box below:

14. Have you acted upon any possible concerns you have using the following? (Please tick as many as are applicable)

Talking to your partner		Talking to friends or family	
Talking to other parents		Using parent forums on the internet	
Talking to your child about their imaginary friend		Talking to your child about your concerns	
Reading research about imaginary friends (e.g. internet, books, magazines)		Talking to your child's teacher or school	
Other (please state)			

15. Please tick the extent to which these statements apply to you: (Please tick just one for each statement)

	Never	Sometimes	Often	Always
a) I encourage my child to play with their imaginary friend				
b) I discourage my child from playing with their imaginary friend				
c) I ignore my child playing with their imaginary friend				
d) My child plays with their imaginary friend whilst I am present				
e) I do mind my child playing with their imaginary friend in front of adults and other parents				
f) I limit my child's play with their imaginary friend when guests are round				
g) I get embarrassed when my child plays with their imaginary friend in front of other parents				
h) I get embarrassed when my child plays with their imaginary friend in front of other children				
i) I mind my child playing with their imaginary friend at school				
j) I mind my child playing with their imaginary friend whilst at a friend's house				
k) I join in with the pretense of my child's imaginary friend e.g. by setting a place at the dinner table for them				
l) I join in with the pretense by talking to my child's imaginary friend				
m) I join in with the pretense of my child's imaginary friend privately at home				
n) I join in with the pretense of my child's imaginary friend when out in public				

16. I would mind my child playing with an imaginary friend during: (Please circle one rating for each age)

	Not at all				Very much
Infancy (1 – 3 years old)	**1**	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**
Early childhood (4 – 6 years old)	**1**	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**
Middle childhood (7 – 9 years old)	**1**	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**
Late childhood (10 – 12 years old)	**1**	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**
Early adolescence (13 – 15 years old)	**1**	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**
Adolescence (16 – 21 years old)	**1**	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**

17. Have your views about imaginary friends changed since your child created one? (Please tick one)

Yes, more positive		**Yes, more negative**		**No, remained the same**	

Please feel free to write any additional comments relating to question 17 that you may have in the box below:

18. If known to them, what have been the responses of the following people to your child's imaginary friend? (Please tick one for each person)

	Unknown	Negative	Mixed	Positive
Siblings				
Teachers				
Child's friends				
Other parents				

Please feel free to add any further views or comments in the box below:

Please now complete the last page (page 7)

Please can all parents complete this page

Family Information

1. Your relationship to child: _____	Your ethnicity: _____
Your nationality: _____	Your religion: _____
Your occupation: _____	How long have you lived in the UK? _____

2. Your child's gender: Girl ☐ Boy ☐	Your child's age: _____
Their ethnicity: _____	Their nationality: _____
How long have they lived in the UK? _____	Their position in the family: (please tick) Only child ☐ Eldest child ☐ Middle child ☐ Youngest child ☐

THANK YOU! Thank you very much for completing this questionnaire.

Would you be willing to talk in more detail about your views and experiences?

I am looking for parents who would be willing to talk in more detail about their views. If you would be interested in talking about your views and experiences of imaginary friends, please tick this box ☐ and I will contact you.

Your telephone number:

_____

And/or

Your email address:

_____

What did we find?

If you'd like to receive an email with a summary of findings when available please tick the box ☐ and add your email address below.

Your email address:

_____

Appendix D

Sample Interview Schedule

1. Tell me about your child's imaginary friend

   Prompts - How do you know about your child's imaginary friend? How do you respond to it? Do you encourage it? If so in what way? Do you discourage it? If so, in what way? Do you ignore it? If so, in what way?
2. Do you get involved in the play? If so, in what way? If not, why is this?

   Prompt - Does your child involve you with their imaginary friend play? If so, in what way?
3. What was your initial reaction to your child first engaging with their imaginary friend?

   Prompt - Did you want to find out more information about imaginary friends? If so, who did you speak to, where did you look to for information, and what did you find out? Was it helpful?
4. What aspects of your child having an imaginary friend do you enjoy and what pleases you about it?

5. What do you feel are the advantages and disadvantages for your child having an imaginary friend?

   Prompt - Do you feel there are any advantages and disadvantages for you as a parent with regard to your child having an imaginary friend?
6. Are there contexts in which you are more and less happy for your child to play with their imaginary friend? …. Why is this?

7. You stated that you would be *highly/mildly* concerned if your child had an imaginary friend at the age of ….., Why is this? (Prompt - Is this view influenced by how you think others or society may perceive it, or is it based on your own views about what is acceptable?) OR You stated that you *would not be concerned* if your child had an imaginary friend at the age of …., why is this?

8. You stated that you *do/don't* feel concerned about your child having an imaginary friend, why is this? (Prompt – Have you ever felt concerned about it? When was this and why?)

   If concerns – What are these concerns and how have you gone about acting upon them? Was this helpful? Do you feel that your child is aware of these concerns?
9. How do you find out information about your child's imaginary friend? (Prompt questions - Do you talk to your child about their imaginary friend? What sort of things do you ask and what are you trying to find out?)

10. Would you like your child to talk about their imaginary friend with you or are you happy for them to be kept relatively private?

11. Why do you think that some other parents may have different views to you about imaginary friends?

Has experiencing imaginary friends with your child changed your views at all?

12. If have a partner - Does your partner/the child's father have the same or different views about the imaginary friend play to you? Can you tell me about this?

13. If known to them, what has been the reaction of other parents, teachers, adults and children to your child having an imaginary friend? (Prompt question - Have you or your child ever experienced negativity from other adults or children about the imaginary friend?)

Sample interview information sheet and consent form

Parent views on their children's imaginary friends

Information sheet and consent form

Name of researcher: Sophie Sugarman
Affiliation: Institute of Education, University of London
Purpose of data collection: Doctoral Research
Contact: ssugarman@ioe.ac.uk

Dear parent/carer,

I am a student at the Institute of Education completing my Doctorate in Professional Educational, Child and Adolescent Psychology (DEdPsy). I am currently employed as a trainee educational psychologist and I am conducting a piece of doctoral research as a registered student.

The purpose of this research is to elicit the views and attitudes of parents towards their children having imaginary companions. The reason for conducting this research is to help broaden understanding of the phenomenon of imaginary companions and develop a greater general understanding of pretend play and children's friendships.

As participants, you will be required to take part in a short interview with myself to explore your views and attitudes towards your children having imaginary companions. A requirement of participation in the study is that you are a parent or carer who has had experience of their child/children having had an imaginary companion or whose child/children currently have an imaginary companion. All interviews will be audio-taped for analysis at a later date and the interview time will vary according to the participant, but should last no longer than 45 minutes. All interviews will be completed in confidence and in your own time. Confidentiality and anonymity will be employed and it is hoped that the interviews will provide you with an opportunity to express your views privately and without judgement.

It is important to note that participation in this research is not compulsory. You are not obliged to take part in this study and it is important that you are aware that you are free to withdraw from this study at any point. Should you choose to withdraw, you may do so without obligation to provide a reason. Any information gathered that forms part of the written report will not allow identification of any individual.

Participants will be offered feedback when the research is completed and written summary will be available.

Please read the statements below, and then sign and date the form if you consent to participate.

I understand that:

- The data I provide is being collected as part of a doctorate in professional educational, child and adolescent psychology and will be used to inform doctoral research.

- All interview transcripts will be stored electronically, with a secure password that only I will have access to. The data will be kept like this for a period of 18 months, after which time it will be destroyed.
- My views will be collected confidentially.
- I have the right to withdraw from the study at any time and without reason.
- I will be able to obtain general information about the findings of this study by contacting the researcher.
- By signing the consent form, I give consent for data to be used for the purposes outlined above.

If you have any questions about the above, please ask me to clarify them before you give signed consent.

I hereby consent to participate in the study which has been fully explained to me.

Participant's name (BLOCK CAPITALS): ……...……..

Participant's signature:…….……....

Date:……..…….

Please note that this form will be kept separately from your data

Your participation is very much appreciated!

Appendix E

Ethical considerations

All participating parents in the study were clearly informed as to the purpose of the research through an explanatory letter and were given the opportunity to contact me with any questions they may have had. Participation in both phases of this research was voluntary. Questionnaires were anonymous unless the participant provided the researcher with their contact details as consent to be interviewed or as a wish to be informed of the outcomes from the study, and such data was input by the researcher into a password protected database and the original questionnaires destroyed. For participants who were interviewed, their initials were changed, and anonymity was maintained throughout the study and report. All interviews remained confidential and participants were informed that their views were sought without judgement from the interviewer. Interview transcripts were kept as a password protected document and recordings were destroyed. Participants were aware that they could withdraw participation at any time and could refuse to answer any questions they did not wish to provide their view for.

BPS Ethical Approval Form – DEdPsy Y2-Y3

STUDENT RESEARCH ETHICS APPROVAL FORM
Psychology & Human Development

This form should be completed with reference to the BPS Code of Ethics and Conduct – available online from www.bps.org.uk

On which course are you registered? DEdPsy_____

Title of project: Parents' attitudes towards their children having imaginary companions and the factors affecting their views.

_____

Name of researcher(s): Sophie Sugarman _____

Name of supervisor/s (for student research): Ed Baines and Karen Majors _____

Date: 30/01/2012_____Intended start date of data collection (month and year only): 05/2012_____

1. Summary of planned research (please provide the following details: project title,

purpose of project, its academic rationale and research questions, a brief description of methods and measurements; participants: recruitment methods, number, age, gender, exclusion/inclusion criteria; estimated start date and duration of project). It's expected that this will take approx. 200–300 words, though you may write more if you feel it is necessary. Please also give further details here if this project been considered by another (external) Research Ethics Committee.

Mothers' and fathers' attitudes towards their children having imaginary companions in the context of child gender and child age.

The study will aim to provide a greater understanding of the phenomenon of imaginary companions by exploring a scarcely examined aspect of the phenomenon; the attitudes of parents. During the pre-school years, many children create imaginary companions that become incorporated into their everyday real life and in some cases, the routines of the family (Singer and Singer, 1990; Mauro, 1991). More recent research also shows that whilst the majority of children who create imaginary companions do so in the pre-school years or upon entering school, others create them as late as ten years of age (Hoff 2004-2005). Hoff (2004-2005) states that the appearance of an imaginary companion in a child's life may worry parents, despite a large amount of research demonstrating there to be no reason for parents to be alarmed. Despite it being apparent that parents may have concerns regarding their child's creation and engagement with an imaginary companion, little research attention has been focused upon this. Within my search of existing literature into the phenomenon of imaginary companions, I came across one article with a specific focus upon parental views of imaginary companions (Brooks and Knowles, 1982), one article with a specific focus upon parental views of pretend play as a function of their child having an imaginary companion (Gleason, 2005), and a small number of articles whose specific focus was not upon parental views of imaginary companions but had asked within a questionnaire about their children's imaginary companions for their views upon them (e.g. Newson and Newson, 1976; Manosevitz et al., 1973; Gleason et al., 2000).

Research questions:

1. What are the attitudes of parents regarding their children having imaginary companions? Do they/would they encourage the behaviour, get actively involved in it, and limit the play in certain contexts? And do these views vary according to experience of imaginary companions, parent gender, child gender, parent religion and child age?
2. What do parents feel are the advantages and disadvantages of having an imaginary companion and what affects their views regarding these?
3. Are parents concerned about their children having imaginary companions and what factors affect their level of concern?

A mixed method of data collection will be used for this study. The proposed design is to use questionnaires aimed at mothers and fathers of school aged children (primary school reception, year 1, year 4 and year 5) whose children have or once had an imaginary companion that they are aware of in order to elicit their views. There will also be a questionnaire aimed at mothers and fathers who are not aware of their children having an imaginary companion, in order to gain the views of these

parents and determine if they differ from those of parents who have experienced the phenomenon. Participants will be gathered by letters being sent out via schools within a north London borough which explain the purpose of the study and their involvement, to which the questionnaire will be attached and instructions for return will be included. Given that parents can prove challenging to engage as participants in research, a large number of questionnaires will be distributed via schools to ensure a good enough response rate for the research to be reliable and follow up letters will be sent to parents who have not responded within fourteen days. It is hoped that 250 questionnaires will be returned for analysis, and that there will be a combination of mothers' and fathers' views, although it is predicted that mothers will be more highly represented than fathers. Parents will be told that it is not necessary to ask their children for details of their imaginary companions and no descriptive information except IC gender and age, if known by the parent already, will be asked for. Questions regarding other forms of pretense will also be included to take the emphasis off imaginary companions and to encourage more parents to respond. At the end of the questionnaire, consent will be sought for parents who are willing to participate in a follow up interview to further explore their views. Of those parents who consent to be interviewed, 20 will be selected.

The in-depth interviews will consist of semi-structured questions, allowing flexibility for the interviewer and interviewee when discussing their experience (qualitative data). These will be recorded on a dictaphone for the purpose of later analysis. The participants will all be over the age of 18 years old and so they will be able to sign the informed consent form themselves. Before the consent form is issued to the participants, information about the aims of the study will be given to the possible participants. They will be informed where and how the interviews will be carried out and what will happen with their data once the interview is completed. Please see ethics below.

2. Specific ethical issues (Please outline the main ethical issues which may arise in the course of this research, and how they will be addressed. It's expected that this will require approx. 200–300 words, though you may write more if you feel it is necessary. You will find information in the notes about answering this question).

The proposed study will adhere to the British Educational Research Association (BERA) and British Psychological Society (BPS) ethical guidelines at all times. I will develop an ethical framework for this study based on informed consent, the right to withdraw, confidentiality and anonymity (Barbour & Schostak, 2005). Since the purpose of the data collection is to capture parent views and not to change their opinions, I will decline any invitations from participants to give my own advice or approval during data collection (Patton, 2003).

Informed Consent

At the start of the questionnaire, the nature of the research will be explained and parents will be asked to complete the questionnaire if they wish to participate. Through completing the questionnaire, parents will consent to take part in the study. Parents who wish to be interviewed, they will state this desire by ticking a box on the questionnaire. Interviewees will be provided with an information sheet about the research and the interview, and will be asked to sign this sheet as consent to take part. All parents taking part in the study at both stages will be informed that they do not have to answer questions that they do not wish to answer, and that they are free to withdraw from the study at any point if they so desire.

Debriefing

For parents participating in the questionnaire, they will be able to tick a box indicating whether they wish to receive information regarding the outcome of the study. At the end of the interview sufficient time will be allocated for the debriefing process allowing the participant to take their time and to go over any queries or questions they have regarding the research. The researcher will do their best to ensure that no participant leaves the interview with confusion or feeling emotional and this will be achieved by administering a thorough debriefing session.

Confidentiality / Anonymity

Some of the data collected could possibly be sensitive, so when inputting and transcribing the data from the questionnaires and interviews the participant's characteristics will be modified honouring anonymity. Confidentiality will be respected and only the researcher will have access to the questionnaires and interview transcripts (both audio and word document).

Deception

Deception on the part of the researcher will not be evident in this study. The researcher will be honest and upfront with the participants. For participants of the questionnaire, the front page will clearly explain the purpose of the study and their involvement. For participants being interviewed, full details of the procedure of the study (as it appears on the consent form) will be read out to the participant and clarity confirmed before the consent form is handed to them to read and sign.

3. Further details

Please answer the following questions.

		YES	NO	N/A
1	Will you describe the exactly what is involved in the research to participants in advance, so that they are informed about what to expect?	■	☐	☐
2	Will you tell participants that their participation is voluntary?	■	☐	☐
3	Will you obtain written consent for participation?	■	☐	☐
4	If the research is observational, will you ask participants for their consent to being observed?	☐	☐	■
5	Will you tell participants that they may withdraw from the research at any time and for any reason?	■	☐	☐
6	With questionnaires, will you give participants the option of omitting questions they do not want to answer?	■	☐	☐
7	Will you tell participants that their data will be treated with full confidentiality and that, if published, it will not be identifiable as theirs?	■	☐	☐
8	Will you debrief participants at the end of their participation (i.e. give them a brief explanation of the study)?	■	☐	☐

If you have ticked **No** to any of Q1-8, please ensure further details are given in section 2 above.

		YES	NO	N/A
9	Will your project involve deliberately misleading participants in any way?	☐	■	☐
10	Is there any realistic risk of any participants experiencing either physical or psychological distress or discomfort? If **Yes**, give details on a separate sheet and state what you will tell them to do if they should experience any problems (e.g. who they can contact for help).	☐	■	☐
11	Will your project involve human participants as a secondary source of data (e.g. using existing data sets)	☐	■	☐

If you have ticked **Yes** to any of 9 - 11, please provide a full explanation in section 2 above.

12	Does your project involve working with any of the following special groups?	YES	NO	N/A
	• Animals	☐	■	☐
	• School age children (under 16 years of age)	☐	■	☐
	• Young people of 17-18 years of age	☐	■	☐
	• People with learning or communication difficulties	☐	■	☐
	• Patients	☐	■	☐
	• People in custody	☐	■	☐
	• People engaged in illegal activities (e.g. drug-taking)	☐	■	☐

If you have ticked Yes to 12, please refer to BPS guidelines, and provide full details in sections 1 and 2 above. **Note that you may also need to obtain satisfactory CRB clearance (or equivalent for overseas students).**

There is an obligation on the Student and their advisory panel to bring to the

attention of the Faculty Research Ethics Committee any issues with ethical implications not clearly covered by the above checklist.

4. Attachments

Please attach the following items to this form:

- Approval letter from external Research Ethics Committee, if applicable
- Where available, information sheets, consent forms and other materials to be used to inform potential participants about the research.

5. Declaration

This form (and any attachments) should be signed by the Trainee, Academic and EP Supervisors and then submitted to the Programme Office. You will be informed when it has been approved. If there are concerns that this research may not meet BPS ethical guidelines then it will be considered by the Faculty Research Ethics Committee. ***If your application is incomplete, it will be returned to you.***

For completion by students

I am familiar with the BPS Guidelines for ethical practices in psychological research (and have discussed them in relation to my specific project with members of my advisory panel). I confirm that to the best of my knowledge this is a full description of the ethical issues that may arise in the course of this project.

Signed..... ..Print Name SOPHIE SUGARMAN
....Date.....
(Trainee Educational Psychologist)

For completion by supervisors/ advisory panel

We consider that this project meets the BPS ethics guidelines on conducting research and does not need to be referred to the Faculty Research Ethics Committee.

Signed..... ..Print Name
....Date.....
(Academic Research Supervisor)

Signed..... ..Print Name
....Date.....
(EP Supervisor)

If you feel the application should be referred to the FREC, please contact Ed Baines in the first instance.

FREC use

Date considered:_____ Reference:_____

Approved and filed ☐ Referred back to applicant ☐ Referred to RGEC ☐

Signature of Chair of FREC:_____

Appendix F

Example responses to open-ended questionnaire items

NIC Parents

Disadvantages	Example excerpt	Q'aire ID
Negative impact on development of real life friends	*I believe it would hinder a child to play with imaginary friends, worlds etc only because it gives them less time and confidence to make or have real friends.*	1
	Imaginary friend affects children and they may not socialise as well as they should with others.	10
	...there could be disadvantages too if it affects them making friends or sustaining friendships with actual human beings	17
	I think it could stop children mixing and interacting with other children if they had an imaginary friend.	18
	Could stop them socialising with their peer group.	75
	Children should interact with their live friends rather than sit at home and converse with something that is not there.	126
	On the one hand it provides a friend to play with, on the other hand it may stop him playing with other children.	131
Challenges parental control	I imagine it would be difficult to parent a child with an IF as far as not knowing anything about this friend they hold so closely, and knowing when to say enough is enough. I'm not setting a meal out on the table for an imaginary friend, and in some cases this could cause a lot of rows between parent and child.	109
	No control over what they are thinking/feeling if my child was showing signs of having an imaginary friend as they be secretive and become intraverted.	131

IC parents

Disadvantages	Example excerpt	Q'aire ID
IC used as a scapegoat	He was used as an excuse by my son to explain bad behaviour, or a mess or damage that my son had made which was challenging to manage.	17
	The IF also told my son to do things that he shouldn't until it was made clear that the person who did it was the one in trouble.	20
	As she has got older she has started to blame one of her imaginary friends whenever she does anything naughty. This has been the main disadvantage.	18

NIC parents

Advantages	Example excerpt	Q'aire ID
IC provides emotional support	I believe an IF would be quite useful to a child's psycho-social development in that it would be someone to bounce ideas off of, discuss internal dilemmas or provide support if a child feels insecure about a situation.	16
	As my child is an only child he may invent someone of his own age and gender to be able to share things with which he may find difficult to do with an adult. To enable him to express any feelings he has to his "friend".	30
	Can see advantages of a shy introverted child expressing some emotions and interaction with an imaginary friend	160
	I think that in the case of my son, an imaginary friend might be helpful, in that he worries a lot and might like to have a special person to share those worries with	182
Companionship	It must be fun for kids to have imaginary friends to play with when they are at home after school. They maybe feel less lonely (when they are young)	33
	I guess it has some advantages that your child...always has a friend around.	109
	On the one hand it provides a friend to play with…	131

IC parents

Advantages	Example excerpt	Q'aire ID
Support for emotional development	We see them as a way for him to explore his emotions, thoughts and feelings about the world. Our son is adopted and anything that helps him manage his feelings is a good thing.	1
	I feel that her imaginary friend has helped to shape her into an open and honest person, with no/little hang ups about expressing herself.	8
	Daniel talked about Beaker and it seemed to give him confidence and help him deal with new situations. It also helped him talk about his emotions.	24
	I think that the imaginary space family and world my child has created has strong advantages. Before my second child was born it provided companionship for voicing feelings for example. It has made my child more articulate and help deal with real life situations by projecting what he hears, learns from the real world, movies and TV into his own world.	46
Support for social development	It supports the development of empathy.	30
	Socially it is good as they can become empathetic with others who may be sad etc (they will demonstrate this through talk about their IF)	31
	It is an opportunity to practising special relationships	42
	Potentially helpful in rehearsing interpersonal relations (and empathy too!)	59
Support for imagination and creative development	To me it shows that he has an active imagination and create different scenarios with them.	47
	I see it as a huge sense of imagination and play. At the moment!	50

	We recognise imaginary friends as being not only harmless but potentially helpful in cultivating the child's (our child's) capacity for imaginative and creative thought	59
	I think it is an advantage as it allows the child to develop an imagination and encourages role play	31
	I think it's good for building on her creativity	34
	I feel it creates imagination and is a sign of intelligence especially if from an early age. It creates good role play skills.	45
Provides companionship and play opportunities	Imaginary friends enables my child to be playful. She talks, sings and plays with her imaginary friends.	22
	Michael only ever turned up when she was playing on her own.	21
	Before my second child was born it provided companionship	46

NIC parents

Concerns	Example excerpt	Q'aire ID
Child experiencing social and emotional difficulties	We feel that if our child had imaginary friends it would mean that he is feeling lonely, and maybe not having any real friends. It may aslo mean that they are not getting the attention in their home life that they should be getting.	9
	I would be concerned that it provided some wish fulfillment role for them, which might indicate they were unhappy or lonely.	35
	Also I would feel that my child may be lonely or lacking something if they had invented an imaginary friend which would concern me	55
	I would see an imaginary friend as an expression of something they are not able to resolve internally so would take it as a warning sign that demands attention.	89
Negative impact on development	I would be concerned if this started to hinder making 'real' friends or becoming too insular/isolated.	58

of real life friends	I would be concerned if this totally sublimated real friendships	160
	If it is to the degree that they exclude real children or family then I would be concerned.	162
	Concerned they didn't want to interact with other children as preferred solace of imaginary friend.	185
Negative perceptions of peers	Concerned they may be bullied or teased.	185
	I would worry that they would be teased at school.	166
	I would be concerned if my child had an imaginary friend because I'd worry that he/she'd be a bit of a loner and would be laughed at.	178
	They may get bullied or teased, especially when older.	182
Challenge parental control	I would worry that I wouldn't know how to deal with it.	63
	I would be concerned that it would be challenging to manage, I think the child would have too much control and be able to tell you that you're not right about things to do with it.	130
Sign of mental health difficulties	I would be wondering whether they had a personality disorder.	129
	My thoughts are that a child with an imaginary friend might have mental health problems, like schizophrenia.	125
Conditional concerns	This very much depends on the age of a child and the extent that the child engages with the imaginary friend. If my child was 5 and played with an imaginary friend when alone I would have no concerns. However, if my child was 12 and played with her imaginary friend at school instead of classmates, I might be concerned.	77
	I would not be concerned by having an imaginary friend as long as it doesn't stop the child mixing with its peers and being sociable and isn't affecting the rest of the family's life and routine.	163

	It would not be any concern to me as a parent unless he spent very little time with 'actual' friends, was reluctant to play with other children or was over the age of 8/9.	165
	My concern would vary depending on my child's age, length of time they have the imaginary friend and how big a part they play in their life.	13
	My level of concern would depend on the age of my child, the extent to which they were preoccupied with their fantasy and the role it appeared to play for them.	35
Age	At age 8 I would worry slightly but a younger child not necessarily.	13
	It would not concern me too much unless it carried on into his teenage years.	29
	My level of concern would depend on my child's age	38
	I would be concerned if it continued after a certain age, like 7 years.	118

IC parents

Concerns	Example excerpt	Q'aire ID
Age	Our son is only 6. We view this as a normal progression but I guess it would cause concern if it increased or continued as he gets older.	1
	I would be worried if it continued after he begins at school	46
	If the imaginary friends stay around when he reaches 10 years old then I would feel that there was a problem, as I think that is something that should have passed a few years before.	47
No concerns	We never felt that they were a concern as they didn't have any negative impact on our lives.	2
	We don't have any concerns; Isabelle's a healthy happy 3 year old with an active imagination - she's very sociable, and has plenty of "real" friends.	61
	I have no concerns. They don't lead her astray or anything like that.	20

	At no time were we worried or distressed about his 'friend'. Our child was always happy and able to make 'real' friends at nursery and school.	16

Appendix G

Example interview transcript

S: Questionnaire IC50 – Mother, White British, Church of England, Events Producer, Always lived UK, Boy aged 3, White British, Youngest child, current IC, completely invisible, animals (with lots of them)

S: First of all it would be great to hear from you about your son's imaginary friend and any details you have about it

E: Do I have to be specific to one person? The irony is that since putting the questionnaire together he's actually stopped talking about it! But, my nephew has one and we talk about it a lot.

S: Well, the research doesn't actually have to be a current imaginary friend so any parent who's child has had one in the past and it's disappeared now or anything is absolutely fine because it's just about the experiences you've had and your views on it

E: And my own as well?

S: That would be brilliant.

E: Yes, it definitely has. So, okay, my nephew is called T and he has an imaginary friend called Leodore. He's now 6 and has had him since he was 3. At any point in the day he will go and take himself off no matter who's there (they're a family of 4 children) be it us, cousins, the 4 kids or a handful of people, and quite frequently go and play with Leodore as preferred company to the other kids. And Leodore basically goes on big adventures and takes him with him, talking to him while he's doing it and it's an imaginary scenario the whole time. So, they'll be doing some crazy things in the house when it just becomes a bit of role play to the point where things like he'll come down and say "Leodore's disappeared down the loo and he's now travelling down the pipe" and talk about it like some crazy, fantastical, creature/person/boy who then will appear 20 minutes later back in a different situation. He brings him in and out of conversation with us quite happily and with the kids that are there.

S: Okay, so it's very imaginative?

E: Yes. It's always with humour and I think in the questionnaire you asked about age and because he's 6 nobody is concerned it's anything more than imagination. But that also comes from my parents because they've always said that they knew it was nothing to be concerned about. I had an imaginary friend until I was about 6 or 7 from as along as I can remember and she was quite a serious part of our family. I remember her vividly. Mum and Dad went to get me checked out because they thought it was really strange. They took me to a psychotherapist for early years because she was so vivid and we laid a place for her at the table and she was very much part of our family. She was called Lister which I think was probably quite strange but I have a very vivid recollection of her. My sister is two years younger than me and she was always closer to me than my sister. So R was always very jealous of me because I had this person

that she could never get into being with. Mum and Dad were told by this person that it was nothing to worry about and was just a sign of a high functioning imagination, so from that point they always joked about it with us when I grew up that they realised it was something they were wrong on and that they've said to R when it first came up with T that it was nothing to worry about at all. So we've never had it as a conscious, freaky thing.

E: O is my son and he's never had people but he has animals. He'll see things in the house and be playing with a dog. He played with Bonzo, a dog, for a long time and I had to step over him in the hallway and take him for walks and I'd be told off if I went near him. He'd have a really vivid picture of him and he'd come and do the school run with us. I'd have to hold the imaginary lead and if we went in to drop my daughter off I couldn't let go of the lead even if it had been 10 minutes since he'd remembered talking about it. Things like that I thought were extended role-play. And he's had various things since then. He had sea lions for a couple of weeks that kept re-appearing, he had 5 on the go at one point.

S: Are they always animals?

E: Always animals, he's never had a person.

S: In his case, you know about it because he plays with them in front of you and likes to involve you in it?

E: Yes, exactly. He won't always involve me, but then if I'm getting in the way of what's happening then he will bring me into it. Having said that, since I filled in the questionnaire 2 or 3 weeks ago he hasn't mentioned any of them since and it was something that was going on for quite a while.

S: It's still great to hear your experiences and your views on it regardless of whether they're around. And it's interesting that they seem to have disappeared a little bit now.

E: Yeah, and then they come back. He's spending a lot of time at home on his own at the moment without his sister because she's at school. So sometimes it's maybe about isolation, I don't know.

S: Would you say that you're quite happy to encourage it?

E: I'm honestly delighted. For me, he's living out a whole series of stories and he's developing his imagination. Sometimes I'll hear structures of stories that we've been talking about. The sea lions came from a visit to the zoo. I feel like it's him incorporating bits of his other experiences and living out how he feels about things or his emotions. It was interesting reading the questionnaire because I think if he was bit older, say 7+, I would probably start to worry.

S: What is it about him being older that would make you worry about it?

E: It's not about they've limited their imagination by that stage… Children are more self-conscious and don't necessarily… I don't know. I can't actually put words to why I'd be worried. I'd be worried that he wasn't living out those stories with other people

or that it was maybe a replacement for friends or that he wasn't getting the interaction or the creativity anywhere else.

S: So it's about you not wanting it to be instead of real life friends?

E: Exactly. At the moment he and T are in this world for quite a lot of the time and that's something that I'd be concerned about if it was 7/8+. And then your question about 10 to 13, I'd really worry at that point if they weren't engaging with other children potentially in the same way. Also, that they could be subject to be teased. At the moment T is 6 and he does it all the time and everyone knows Leodore. All his friends, all his cousins, all of us. There's a point where he'll start to be teased soon if he doesn't grow out of it in a way. I think you always think it's a phase and you'll grow out of it.

S: So it's a bit about the perceptions that other people would have that would concern you, whether other children would find the behaviour a bit odd and whether he would be teased?

E: Yes. And you're always trying to spot (well I always am) and think is your child normal, is your child normal. In the early years when creative play is everything you want to instil in them, and when nursery and reception are all about free play and a child's sense of play, all those things I find very exciting. And then there's something about age 7+ where you want to know that they're a bit more aware or conscious about it. Or that it's more structured and they compartmentalise it a bit more and they substitute those things with friends and other activities.

S: It sounds like you're thinking about imaginary friends as a stage in development? Like it's part of development when you're young but actually when you're a bit older perhaps your development should move on in different ways?

E: Yes, absolutely. It's a phase in that development and there are outlets then for that to be satisfied in your mind. I haven't come across anybody who has older children with imaginary friends.

S: There is some research that shows children who are 10-12 (and older) quite often keep their imaginary friends private from their parents and I wonder why you might feel this is?

E: Probably because of reactions like I've just shown. That's awful. I'd hate to think that I'd start to stem it. They must translate when a parent starts to become concerned. Even if it's not said, it's obvious in the body language. I don't mind if it's ever talked about in public or with other friends or in the street. We'll role-play until the cows come home. But I'd be more self-conscious about doing that with an older kid. So I can completely understand why it's internalised at that point if a child feels that.

S: So you think that they're picking up on the perceptions of parents that it's not necessarily acceptable?

E: Yes, and social norms.

S: So you think they're picking up on perceptions of parents and also their peers?

E: Absolutely.

S: And would you prefer your child if they did have an imaginary friend at 10 years old to talk to you about it rather than keeping it private?

E: I'd much prefer, but I'd still feel very nervous about it and my reason for wanting them to talk about it would be so that I could shrink them out as opposed to support that play. I'd treat it at that point more as a problem to be ironed out and that's awful. I think I would talk about O in a concerned way if he were older and still did it. It's awful now that I hear myself say it.

S: It's not awful, that's just your opinion.

E: No, but I wish I didn't. As soon as you hear yourself say "isn't it wonderful, it's all about creative play", why should that stop all of a sudden? But it does, definitely in my mind.

S: At the moment you get involved in the play and I wonder how you do that, is it that your child asks you to or do you voluntarily get involved?

E: It would be voluntary and it would be from me asking questions like what's going on or about names. With one or two opening questions I'll be told to do stuff or to follow him here or to engage in it in some way.

S: So he has the ideas and tells you what to do?

E: He always has the ideas and he always leads it. It's the same with T.

S: Thinking back to when your child's imaginary friend first appeared, what was your initial reaction to seeing them engage with it? At that point did you want to find out more information and if so how did you go about this?

E: Humour actually. Humour and delight. I was really thrilled because you see your child's imagination play out in so few ways. Whether it's with toys like farmyards and dolls houses where you see role playing happening, and that's delightful, I just met it in the same way as if it was that extended into something that was completely in his head. There was a whole other afternoon's play that I could join in when I wanted to or that would reappear during the week. It made you want to find out a bit more before it would change into something else. So, the dog that was with us for 2 to 3 weeks changed into the sea lions.

E: A friend of mine's son also has animals as opposed to children and he has a pig. His pig has been around a long time. He's the same age and she tells her friends and us because it's humorous and delightful at this age. There are so many things about them exploring and discovering that everything feels a delight. And there's a naivety to us probably as parents at that point which you can delight in as well, whereas I think everyone becomes more cynical the older kids are and suddenly it's not the

norm anymore. Whereas when they're 3 or 4, and 5 or 6, everything is the norm. Being crazy is the norm.

S: So you're finding you're getting an insight into his development and what's going on for him?

E: Absolutely. And language. Lots of language and vocabulary coming through that we've read in stories that will appear and I think, "Gosh, that's gone in". It's been absorbed and it's lovely to hear it coming out in a different situation because its part of his development.

S: Going on from that, I just wondered if there was anything else you wanted to tell me about what kind of aspects of it you really enjoy and what pleases you about it?

E: For me, it's dialogue with my son. And with my nephew it's the same that he gets with his mum and me, and that he delights in telling us the stories and I love hearing the stories. He's 6 so has lots more to say about it whereas O is 3, but the 6 year old, my nephew, just talks and talks about these adventures and he makes everyone laugh with them and everyone's involved in them and you get a real insight that just builds that relationship. There's an affinity and a humour there. It's just very endearing to get to know him and what's going on inside his mind and his creativity.

E: I can see O going the same way and it makes me have a whole afternoon of dialogue with him that's not based around a story or something that we're doing, it's just something that he's leading on completely through imagination and I think that's amazing.

S: Linked to that, what do you feel are the advantages and disadvantages for him in having an imaginary friend?

E: It would be about friends, about real friends. That would be my watch out all the time and I was really reassured to hear in nursery that he has lots of friends when he doesn't talk about any. Or he'll talk about one and I was worried that was because he was really self-sufficient in his own company. He plays really happily by himself cause there's a lot going on and whether it's that he's talking about people that he's with or these imaginary animals or anything more than just a bit of play, which I'm absolutely convinced that it is, I don't have concerns but I'm definitely watching out for it. Watching out just for the way that a child would form friendships or be very sociable with other children. And so far he and T are terribly sociable.

S: So as long as it's not getting in the way of forming real life friendships?

E: Exactly, and that would be my only concern. And I think when I was growing up that was a real concern for mum and dad because I was really happy in my own company, didn't want to be with my sister really, and I certainly didn't make friends very easily. The reason my mum took me to this woman was because of one incident when she was walking past the school gates at play time and watched for the entire hour apparently – which only a freaky mum would do because she was so neurotic – and I was stood by myself in the playground for the full hour with everything happening around me and not engaging with anybody.

E: I remember her telling me years later and she was obviously deeply concerned about it and that was about me forming friends and the whole thing being linked together. So I can see what her anxieties were and I think I just have similar… not anxieties at all but a concern where that would the only thing where an imagination takes over real life. With O and with T it never has.

S: Do you think that because you've had that experience when you were younger knowing what your mum's concerns were and then what she found out about it, that it's had a real effect on how you've viewed it?

E: Definitely. Otherwise I'd have been doing a lot of reading and trying to find out what the hell this is cause I haven't seen much about it. I'm close to my friends and my sister which is why we've talked about it and why it can be part of general conversation, but I don't think I'd bring it up in normal conversation with people I didn't know so well. Certainly at school it's never talked about or when they talk about child led play or creative play there's never been a question asked about does he have imaginary friends or are there particular things that you'd want to tell us about. Do you know what I mean? You wouldn't draw it into everyday conversation.

S: Okay, so it's not something that school ever asks about to parents?

E: No. So you know it's not a general child development thing. Often you're looking for competencies or things in development. We've read loads about earlier years and what development means for 3 to 5 and it never comes up on any of those agendas. Or ones that I've seen and that's two kids now and it's never come up like that. So that's why reading it in the school book bag I thought "Oh, maybe this is interesting".

S: Do you find it's not something that comes into parents' radar until perhaps they have a child with one and then they have to do their own research?

E: Absolutely.

S: In terms of the advantages for him, do you find that there are any?

E: At the moment it's too early to say I think. He's 3 and a half. The thing that's surprising me is his vocabulary and his language. That's played out and if it's anything to do with this then that's a real advantage. I wouldn't necessarily hear the language coming out if he didn't talk in this way.

S: So you think maybe its providing further opportunities to rehearse the verbal skills that he's developing?

E: Exactly. And it's well beyond the conversation that he would have with peers. Playground language and the language of play with kids is very different from the way that he tells these stories or will talk about what's happening.

S: As a parent, are there any advantages or disadvantages for *you* in him having an imaginary friend?

E: Only that he's really self-sufficient! And loves his own company, which I find amazing.

S: It makes your job easier!

E: Our first, our daughter was the absolute opposite and needed to be with you all the time and needed to be in adult company a lot of the time. So that's what I was used to. For me it's wonderful hearing him talk and hearing him doing it without me there or when I'm in the room or when I'm in his sight and then I'm drawn into it. I like the fact that self-sufficiency is independent and is enjoying your own company and not being clingy. My daughter was super clingy and he's the opposite.

S: Do you feel he's able to distinguish between reality and fantasy, does he know that his friends aren't real and does that affect your view of it?

E: Yes, I think so and that's also probably why I'm not bothered about it.

S: As he got older, is that something that would be important for you, for him to know that these friends aren't real?

E: Definitely. And actually maybe that's putting words to what I was thinking before about that distinction between reality and not reality. That if I had a 7-year-old saying those things I would be worried about their distinction. With T, it's real. Or he just let's himself into that world where he's gone off to play and you'll hear him talking to Leodore or having fights. Really he is quite dramatic about it all. He can spend whole afternoons in big adventures with this character. Which at the moment, aged 6, we think is wonderful and funny. They're often funny. So R is not worried at all. She's quite laid back about these things as well, she's got 4 kids and he's number 3 so she's seen it all.

S: So the experience with other children has been quite helpful?

E: I think so. She's not neurotic about it all.

S: That's good. Are there any contexts where you feel more or less happy for him to be playing with his imaginary friends?

E: At the moment with O, it can be anywhere, any place, and I'm delighted. But with T we were on the beach at half term and he was shouting at Leodore on the rocks for getting wet as it was a muddy afternoon. I did look around to see if anyone else was looking. I would have been embarrassed if they were, clearly.

S: So it's a bit about other people's perceptions and a bit of embarrassment about it?

E: Yes. And T is 6 and that's the kind of thing where I'd be conscious of other people so I would prefer it to be in the comfort of his own home, with us, which he does quite freely because obviously he trusts us. But he wasn't bothered that anyone else would be listening, he's very absorbed in it when he is.

S: You stated that at the moment you're not concerned about your child having an imaginary friend, I was just wondering have you ever felt concerned about it?

E: No. Not yet. It would be what happens in the future. And R is the same with T. She's not at all concerned. But I think give it a year or so and she would slightly want him to lose it a bit.

S: So it's very dependent on age really?

E: It's terrible to say but yes.

S: You've said that you quite freely talk to your child about their imaginary friends but I wondered how you find out information about their imaginary friend? Is it that you directly talk to them about them and if so, what things would you ask and what are trying to find out?

E: I think trying to get inside their brain. So with T, because he's 6 and a bit more vocal about it, it's trying to find out how real they are so open questions like "What are they up to now?" and "Where is he now?". But I'd never say "Can you see him?" cause it's obvious he's there. I ask questions that I think I'm going to get an interesting response to. "What's he up to now?" is what I normally would ask. And that will give a whole string of "Well yesterday…" and that would be a few stories that would come our way.

S: Is it about finding out what's going on for him at that time or is just more about it being quite nice and amusing to hear about it?

E: At the moment it's been just nice and amusing, there's been nothing where I feel there is a particular thing being played out through it with either of them. It's company. I guess with T we have talked about it and his position in the family. He's got two older brothers who play together; they're inseparable and very similar and play together all the time. He is number 3 and can often probably feel that in the pecking order he's left out a bit. So we do talk about that but he doesn't seem to play out issues through it or stuff that's on his mind. So when we ask him about it, it is purely about the stories and the particular scenarios that are going on as opposed to a concern.

S: So you just want to know more and join in in a way?

E: Exactly, and it is very amusing. I think that's the thing that probably would shift the older he got.

S: Thinking about other parents who might have different views to you, who do you think they might be and why do you think they would have different views to you?

E: Because it's not potentially the norm. It's not a taboo, but I think parent's who weren't sure about it or were nervous about it, probably haven't seen it before or were worried that their child was actually seeing things that weren't real or that were taking it literally.

E: I'd find it really easy to defend and feel really confident defending it. I think it's just a wonderful bit of development. But for parents who thought it was weird, I think they would need to know a bit more about creative play and creative development.

S: So it's a lot about educating yourself on it and what it means?

E: Completely, And knowing that in early years development and child psychology, anything goes really, as long as it's part of what looks like a balanced development and it's not showing as part of other symptoms or as part of other things that manifest themselves.

S: Do you find it's a lot easier if it's not in with other difficulties and just a typical child development?

E: If there were other difficulties that were manifesting either around behaviour or looking like they were psychological then of course I'd worry about it in all of those contexts. The reason that I can delight in T and in O, is that they are just such happy, bouncy, normal boys, and this is just part of their play. That's how I see it and they're forming language and friendships and working the world out.

S: Do you feel again like the experience of you having an imaginary friend has really affected things?

E: Definitely. And I knew she passed and I remember her like yesterday. I do remember laying the table and being really cross with mum when she wasn't given due rights in our family. Mum really had to play along in a way that I think probably was a bit concerning because I was a bit forthright about it. But she passed; she definitely wasn't with me forever and obviously was serving a purpose. I don't honestly know what that purpose was but it was quite good fun!

S: Do you have a partner?

E: Yes.

S: Does he have similar views to you?

E: Yes, absolutely. Less so because he's not be around so much recently, but when he's at home O would feel exactly the same with him as he does with me. N would treat it in exactly the same way. And the same with A who is T's dad. I think he's more cautious because he doesn't spend so much time with him. Leodore is a part of the family, he's a character where I think they've just had to accept and he's at an older age where I think probably his dad is showing a bit of healthy concern he would say.

S: Are you finding that with sister's partner he had got more concerns than she has?

E: Definitely. Without a doubt.

S: Why do you think that is?

E: I think it's probably not being around to see it in context of all the other stuff that's going on, that forms what you would say is normal context. And maybe it's a male thing, I don't know.

S: Part of this research I wanted to see if mums and dads had different views.

E: In our house we're absolutely aligned, but both of us work in the creative arts so I think for us anything that looks like it's about imagination or imaginary or anything that opens up that side of you we feel very excited about. We go to the theatre with them for those very reasons. Whereas in R's case, she's very arts based but her husband is the absolute opposite extreme and is cautious about it all, cautious about expression generally. Maybe it's a gender think but I think maybe it's about an awareness of creativity as well or being able to celebrate it, or expression and knowing how important that is.

S: So it's about individual personality in a way, what you value and what you don't?

E: Completely. And maybe a bit about that embarrassment factor as well.

S: It's a bit unfortunate as I did want to see if mums and dads views differed but I didn't really get any fathers responding so that might be something to do in the future. I think I'm just going to have to look at mum's view really.

E: I can speculate but I wouldn't be able to put any evidence on it.

S: The last thing I wanted to ask you was about the reactions of other people, so other parents, the class teacher, other adults and other children as well. Whether you've ever experienced any negativity?

E: With O, because he's only 3 and a half all of that is recognised by nursery and by our friends and family as being completely part of his development. With T, no not yet, maybe that it is literally about an age thing. He lives in a rural village where he feels trust in everybody. He's not aware of negativity from anyone really and certainly our extended family he either feels a lot of trust with so he just is who he is or he's completely unaware and is who is he is. I hope it's because he feels comfortable in his own skin and the fact that he is with trusted friends and family most of the time and friends that our local to them. It doesn't bother him at all.

S: Maybe that is telling us something about the reactions of other people that they're perhaps not bothered and he is receiving that and is happy to play?

E: Absolutely so far. But I do think that's an age thing, I really do. He's a little 6 year old and looks small in his year and there's something dreadful about probably thinking it's quite cute at this age, which changes as you get older or as the character gets stronger. That's when mum took me because the character was so strong in the family and I was probably 6 or 7. No, I must have been 7 because I remember being in school and well beyond reception year 1.

S: So it's a lot about age and also how strong and vivid the character is for them? Again, going back to that reality/fantasy distinction?

E: Leodore, and O's animals and characters are all playful and they're all in the right place at the right time, they're in those times when they should be playing as opposed to demanding a place at the table or demanding to have them in bed with you.

S: Is there anything that you feel I've not asked you to talk about that you think would be important to say?

E: No. I just hope you're getting some good research, it's fascinating, and anything that's published I would love to see.

Appendix H

Discussion of the sample population

Phase 1 of the study, which used a questionnaire to gain the views of all parents regarding imaginary companions, saw 63 parents of children who currently or previously had an imaginary companion (IC parents) respond and 196 parents of children who did not have an imaginary companion they were aware of (NIC parents). This sample size was in line with previous studies in which IC and NIC children were compared (e.g. Gleason, 2004; Manosevitz et al., 1973). 52% of the children talked about by IC parents had invisible companions, 34% had personified objects, 8% had imaginary worlds, and 6% had a mixture of the different forms according to the parent. This sample is in contrast to previous studies which have found their samples to have more children with personified objects than invisible companions (e.g. Gleason, 2004; Gleason, 2005).

Singer and Singer (1990) suggest that children between the ages of 3- to 6-years are most likely to create imaginary companions. In this study, parents whose children had an IC reported that they created their imaginary companions as early as 1-year old and as late as 8-years old, with the mean age that children created their imaginary companion being 3-years old. In addition, 15 of the 63 IC parents reported the IC to have disappeared, the mean age that this occurred being 5-years old, with the youngest age the ICs disappeared being 4 years old and the latest being 9-years old. These findings provide further support to the claim of Taylor et al. (2004) that not all imaginary companions disappear when a child begins at school.

Furthermore, research also indicates that first born and only children are more likely to create an imaginary companion (e.g. Gleason et al, 2000; Singer & Singer, 1990). In this study, 28% of the children who parents talked about as having an imaginary companion were only children, 35% were eldest children, 5% were middle children and 32% were

youngest children. Whilst the majority were either only or eldest children, youngest children in this study were equally likely to create an imaginary companion as only or eldest children. Given that the age difference between the child and their nearest sibling was not established, the claim by Manosevitz et al. (1973) that children with a large age gap between them and a sibling are also likely to create an imaginary companion cannot be confirmed by this study. Furthermore, 16% of children who parents talked about as not having an IC in this study were only children, 45% were eldest children, 9% were middle children and 29% were youngest children, and a chi-squared test showed no significant difference between IC and NIC children's position in the family.

Previous studies (e.g. Carlson & Taylor, 2005; Pearson et al., 2001) have found girls to be more likely than boys to create an imaginary companion, with girls creating more invisible characters and boys personifying objects more. In this study, IC parents also reported slightly more girls than boys as having an imaginary companion (34 girls and 28 boys), and more girls (62%) as having created invisible characters than boys (40%) and more boys (36%) having personified objects than girls (32%). Boys were however more likely than girls to create an imaginary world (14% of boys compared to 3% of girls) and more likely to have a mixture of the different forms of imaginary companion (11% of boys compared to 3% of girls). Whilst there appear to be differences in the numbers of boys and girls who create imaginary companions and the type of imaginary companion each gender creates, chi-squared tests again showed no significant difference between the gender groups. The findings of this study do however lend support to previous research findings that girls are more likely to create an imaginary companion and more likely to create an invisible character.

Appendix I

Parent view of ICs for her child with autism

Mothers interviewed all held positive views about imaginary companions except for one mother. This mother was a parent of a child with autism who had an imaginary friend. It appeared that for this mother, the child's deep rooted fantasy seemed to act as a constant reminder that her child experienced difficulties. Whilst this parent acknowledged that many typically developing children have imaginary companions, the extent of the fantasy and her daughter's blurring of fantasy and reality resulted in her having a more negative view of the phenomenon. For this parent, it was not the imaginary companion that concerned her per se, but its encompassment in the wider difficulties experienced by her daughter. This mother informed me, "…*because it's tied in with all this other stuff about real and imaginary, I don't… you know yeah it is a concern. You know it is not quite as straightforward as just an imaginary friend to me".*

Furthermore, this mother felt that if her child was able to explain the purpose of the imaginary companion to her or show an awareness that it was pretend then she would feel less concerned about it. Perhaps the ability of typically developing children to explain the nature of their imaginary companion means that parents' concerns are reduced. It was also apparent for this mother that the age of the child didn't affect her views in the same way it did for other parents, perhaps as a result of some acceptance that the child's wider difficulties would not disappear and that the imaginary companion was encompassed within this.

On the other hand, this mother identified that the imaginary companion may have actually helped her daughter by providing a mechanism for making sense of the world and her experiences, and furthermore helped her husband to communicate with his daughter. Therefore, even though this mother had concerns around the overall development of her daughter, she still recognised some benefits of the imaginary companion.