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**First Friends and Social–Emotional Development:  
Early Companions as Pathways to Relational Readiness**

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# Abstract

Children’s earliest friendships often form not with peers but with stuffed animals, blankets, or imaginary companions. These relationships, while easily dismissed as childish play, provide critical practice in social–emotional development. This article reviews research on transitional objects, imaginary companions, and peer relationships as successive contexts in which children develop emotion regulation, perspective-taking, empathy, and prosocial motivation. Drawing on Bronfenbrenner’s bioecological theory, the developmental trajectory from transitional objects to peer friendships is conceptualized as a continuum leading toward relational readiness—the capacity to enter and sustain authentic, reciprocal friendships. Implications for parents and educators are discussed, with recommendations for supporting children’s earliest friendships as foundations for social–emotional competence.

Keywords: transitional objects, imaginary companions, social–emotional development, relational readiness, early friendships

# Early Friendships as Developmental Foundations

Children’s first friendships rarely begin with peers. Instead, they often attach to stuffed animals or invent imaginary companions. These relationships provide safe contexts for practicing emotion regulation, empathy, communication, and problem-solving—skills central to social–emotional development and later peer competence.

# Transitional Objects: Regulation and Security

Winnicott (1953) described stuffed animals, dolls, and blankets as transitional objects that provide comfort and co-regulation when children separate from caregivers. Subsequent research confirms their role in reducing distress and supporting emotion regulation (Passman, 1987; Lehman et al., 2018). By naming and soothing their companions, children externalize regulation strategies that eventually become self-regulation (Denham et al., 2003, 2012).

# Imaginary Companions: Perspective-Taking and Empathy

Between one-third and one-half of children create imaginary companions (Taylor, 1999; Gleason, 2004). These companions offer unique opportunities to rehearse empathy, theory of mind, and perspective-taking (Taylor & Carlson, 1997). Imaginary play also enhances language, storytelling, and communication skills (Roby & Kidd, 2008; Hoff, 2005). Treating companions as intentional agents allows children to explore caregiving roles, conflict resolution, and narrative identity (Severson & Lemm, 2018).

# Peer Friendships: Reciprocity and Repair

By preschool and early elementary years, children begin to form peer friendships characterized by reciprocity, shared play, and mutual repair (Rubin et al., 2006). The competencies rehearsed with transitional and imaginary companions—emotion knowledge, regulation, empathy—predict peer acceptance, friendship quality, and classroom adjustment (Ladd, 1999; Denham et al., 2003, 2012).

# Relational Readiness: A Developmental Destination

Building on my framework of relational readiness (Johnson, 2025), these early relationships can be understood as stages in a friendship continuum: transitional objects (regulation), imaginary companions (empathy and communication), peer friendships (reciprocity), and relational readiness (the preparedness for authentic, resilient relationships). Bronfenbrenner’s bioecological theory (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006) contextualizes this trajectory, emphasizing that family routines, cultural norms, and developmental timing all shape how first friendships support social–emotional growth.

# Implications for Parents and Educators

1. Validate companions. Respect children’s relationships with stuffed animals and imaginary friends rather than dismissing them.  
2. Encourage feeling talk. Use companions to help children label and manage emotions.  
3. Support transitions. Allow transitional objects during separations to scaffold regulation.  
4. Model repair scripts. Use pretend scenarios to rehearse apology and problem-solving strategies.  
5. Balance validation with boundaries. Encourage autonomy while maintaining clear routines.

# Conclusion

First friendships are not trivial. They are essential developmental laboratories where children rehearse the emotional and social competencies required for real peer relationships. Recognizing the developmental significance of stuffed animals, imaginary companions, and early peer friendships reframes them as powerful contributors to social–emotional development and relational readiness.

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