



IMAGINARY FRIEND DURING LOCKDOWN: A CASE REPORT

Psychiatry

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ABSTRACT

Background: Interacting with imaginary companions (friends) is now considered a natural part of childhood for many children. Between a third and two-third of young school age children will engage with imaginary companions (ICs), defined as invisible characters with whom children converse and interact. **Case History:** Here we present a case of 3.5 years old hindu male patient who brought by his parents to psychiatry OPD with complain of having an imaginary friend named X with whom patients plays, feed him, lectures him about do and don't of lockdown, takes photos with X and shows his parents what X is doing in the pictures, on being told there is no one in the pictures patient get annoyed, stop talking, sometimes may agree with his parents but then resumes playing again with X when he is alone last since 15-20 days, otherwise do his normal routine activities with his parents. Parent believes it may be a ghost or black magic and they are excessively worried about their child's behavior. **Conclusion:** This case report demonstrates a case of imaginary companion during COVID-19 lockdown, although it is a common in children but its presentation in COVID-19 lockdown increased the risk of experiencing stress and negative emotions in parents which lead to catastrophising effects on children well-being. It should be interest to psychiatrist and psychologist who may encounter similar presentation in time of COVID-19 lockdown in which children are robbed with their chances of social interaction other than family members and multiplied the responsibility of parents like taking care of home schooling of children, being a peer to them.

KEYWORDS

Imaginary Friend, COVID-19 lockdown

INTRODUCTION

Interacting with Imaginary companions (ICs) is now considered a natural part of childhood for many children, and associated with positive developmental outcomes [2]. Between a third and two-third of young school age children will engage with Imaginary companions (ICs). It's evident at age of two and a half to three years; will mostly disappear by the time the children start school. Imaginary companions (ICs) defined as invisible characters with whom children converse and interact [2]. These characters can include invisible characters which are nevertheless have an air of reality for children, and personified objects.

CASE HISTORY

A case of a 3.5 years old, hindu, male had complaints since 15-20 days having an imaginary friend named X (age is similar to patient) with whom patient plays, feed him, lectures him about do and don't of lockdown and patient took photos with and shows his parents what X was doing in the pictures, on being told there was no one in the pictures patient get annoyed, stop talking, sometimes may agree with his parents but then resumes playing again with X when he was alone.

Birth/ Developmental / Immunization History- NICU admission for 2 days for neonatal jaundice rest was normal. Patient attained developmental milestones and took vaccines at appropriate age.

Past/ Family History- NAD

Personal History- Patient was single child, stays with parents (family of 3), both were working parent with shift changes. Patient has been looked after by neighborhood aunt with patient has cordial relationship. Patient was going to school from age of 2.5 years but presently not going outside and lack of interacting with others due to lockdown.

O/E-

Patient was lean and thin, appropriate to his age, came in night suit and wearing N95 mask. Patient was clingy, didn't leave his parents and gets annoyed when parents attempt to make him sit.

- Fleeting eye contact, annoyed facial expression, but mostly patient remain silent
- On asking about neutral topic like school, neighbors, parents he did not reply at first but being asked by parents he replied "raja chhe, bahu time chhe, to mane kai yaad nthi, mane su khabar hu to nano chhu"
- No muttering to self, no inappropriate behavior was observed

Investigations

- For IQ assessment –Wechsler Preschool and Primary scale of

Intelligence(WPPSI)

- Assessment of anxiety for parents- Mother scored 16 in HAM-A (Moderate anxiety)

Diagnosis-

- Normal childhood behavior according to child's age

Treatment-

- Parents counseled regarding its normalcy in this age and educated about normal childhood developmental stages. Also, parents advised about how to regulate their own anxiety and increase interaction of child with other family member, neighborhood, and friends other than them.

DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION

Although it is a common phenomenon in children, this case report demonstrates Imaginary companionship during COVID-19 lockdown; around 65% of children have an imaginary companion at some point prior to the age of 7 years [1]. It still raises multiple concerns among parents like "is it a black magic, ghost or any other psychological problem", "should we discourage or encourage such behaviour", "will our child ever get better and resources spent upon traditional faith healers." According to Jean Piaget cognitive development stages below 7 years (Preoperational stages) rational thinking is not developed. Also, Imagination and symbolic thinking are strong but abstract thinking and concepts attached to concrete situation are not well developed.

In general authors interpret that desire for social partner is the reason why children create imaginary companion [1]. These children are more emotionally well adjusted; with good IQ, better linguistic skills; outgoing and social not typically shy, isolated or withdrawn, advanced in understanding social relationship [1]. Its presentation in COVID-19 lockdown increased the risk of experiencing stress, anxiety and negative emotions in parents which lead to catastrophizing effects on children well-being. It should be in interest to psychiatrist and psychologist where children are robbed with their chances of social interaction other than family members and multiplied the responsibility of parents like taking care of home schooling of children, being a peer to them etc.

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