

Scary monsters and puppy dogs

'AS a child I had an imaginary friend,' Alison told me, 'and I remember being completely terrified of the scary monsters I imagined were hiding beneath my bed.' Common occurrences for many children, but Alison assures me that 'children get great pleasure from their pretend play'. Evidence suggests that children understand a great deal about pretence and how pretend entities differ from real ones. Children as young as three understand this: a real entity can be seen and touched by themselves and others and will continue to exist even when it is not being thought about.

'I was intrigued by the work of Paul Harris and his colleagues. They found that children responded very warily to an empty box that they had pretended contained a scary monster: they preferred to open the box they had pretended contained a friendly puppy,' Alison explained. 'These experimental findings suggested that children sometimes confused pretence with reality long after first engaging in pretend play, and long after they could provide very detailed accounts of the differing characteristics of pretend and real entities.'

This provided Alison with a foundation for her own research. 'I started by thinking about the influence of the emotional content of the pretence on the child's behaviour. Harris's study had not been clear as to whether the children were only avoiding the monster, only seeking the puppy, or whether they were doing both,' she explained. To test between these competing possibilities, Alison made a very simple but effective modification to

CHRIS CHAFFERON

Harris's experimental design by adding a third box. In her experiments children were asked to pretend that there was a desirable Christmas present in one box, a scary monster in another, and a neutral entity in a third box. Next, Alison asked the children to decide on the order in which they would open the boxes.

The majority of children seemed concerned both to avoid the monster and to seek the Christmas present. However, there was a second group of children (approximately 20 per cent) who were rather different. They opened the desirable Christmas present, but then opened the monster box rather than leaving it until last. 'I was particularly interested in discovering what could be causing this,' Alison said.

She then designed an experiment using transparent boxes rather than dark ones that the children couldn't see through. 'In their everyday pretence the child can clearly see that the banana they are pretending is a telephone is really only a banana. The child can see that they have poured imaginary rather than real tea, and that their imaginary friend is not really in the room with them,' she explained. Children rarely become frightened of scary monsters under the bed during daylight. Alison's experiment supported this argument. The use of the transparent box helped to deplete the 20 per cent of children who appeared confused about the existence of the pretend

entities in the previous experiment, that had used the opaque box.

'I certainly wouldn't want to suggest that all children suffer such confusions. Instead there seem to be some important individual differences here,' Alison said. As well as this, developmental differences, the emotional content of the pretence and the context in which the pretence takes place are highly likely to be important.

Alison confided that as an adult she no longer feared the monsters under her bed. 'But I still experience high levels of emotion from non-real sources. I cry when watching sad films or reading sad books and I fear malevolent people and creatures after watching crime or horror-based films.'

Recently Alison and Alyson Davis, from the Psychology Department at the University of Surrey, have been awarded an ESRC grant to investigate the influence of children's experience on their thinking. One issue to be explored within this work is the role that imagination and pretence have. Once some of these issues have been addressed Alison believes they would be in a much better position to comment on the causes of this particular aspect of irrational thinking during childhood. 'I am particularly intrigued', she said, 'by the role emotion seems to play and how the children's understanding of pretence and reality can influence their understanding of issues such as wishing and magic.'



Dr Alison Bouchier
is at the **Department**
of **Human Sciences,**
Brunel University.
E-mail:
Alison.Bouchier@
brunel.ac.uk