DOWN'S SYNDROME ASSOCIATION

Fantasy and Reality

September 2025



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Introduction

Many young people and adults who have Down's syndrome have a vivid imagination with a tendency to create stories. They may tell these stories to others as if they are true and sometimes, they may occasionally believe them to be so.



Imagining situations that haven't taken place can be a positive thing. It may promote creativity and/or act as a pleasurable diversion from the everyday. It can also help people to decompress after a day at work, school or college.

Occasionally it can be problematic if the person cannot distinguish between what is real and what is fantasy, however this is rare.

Pretend Play

Imaginative play has an important role in a child's development. It gives them the ability to try out and practice what they see and experience in the world.

Although we refer to this as 'pretend' or 'make-believe play,' it is rarely based in fantasy and offers a useful way to manage real-world fears, challenges, and situations.



Why Might this Blurring of Fantasy/Reality Happen?

It is quite typical to imagine things happening that are highly unlikely, for instance marrying your favourite pop star. These kinds of fantasies are normally kept internally and will diminish as we become adults. People who have Down's syndrome engage more in self-talk which is often a representation of what is happening internally and therefore they are more likely to verbalise their fantasies.

Often self-talk will be related to the person's experiences in the real world. People who have Down's syndrome typically have exceptional visual memory for scenes and situations and can accurately recall and then act them out as they had experienced them.

When in a private space, a person may be heard taking on the role of someone in their life such as a teacher giving orders to imagined others in the room. Sometimes inanimate objects such as dolls or stuffed animals are given roles in the play. Other people who have Down's syndrome may act out different scenes from their lives. They might also include fantasy characters or characters from TV or movies. Imagined characters often mirror people in real life.







Others may have concerns that the person is hearing voices or hallucinating however this is rarely the case.

The strength in visual memory and recall may also be related to things they have seen online or in films/TV. Soap operas can be especially popular and a good medium for learning about life and relationships. However, a fascination with a programme or an actor can become a real fixation for some people and the lines between reality and fantasy may become blurred.

People sometimes find it difficult to filter out the emotions of others including those of fictional characters. Whilst watching a programme, they may feel as if they are directly experiencing the emotions being expressed by an actor.

Considerations

- **Generally, self-talk and pretend play will be developmentally appropriate for the person and should not be a cause for concern.**
- **It is advisable to let people engage with these and not stop them unless it is interfering with other aspects of their life.**
- **Some people may need support with their emotions and to understand when something is happening in real life and when it is happening in a programme or film.**
- **Sometimes fantasies can end up competing with everyday real life particularly in situations where the person is under duress or underoccupied.**
- **Look at whether the person needs more/different activities as boredom/stress may lead to an increase in these behaviours.**
- **Special care should be taken to understand the confusion of fact and fantasy when assessing statements made by people who have Down's syndrome.**
- **Fantasies may be misinterpreted by others as a mental health issue especially if a person is acting it out in public.**
- **You can test whether someone understands the difference by asking them to sort scenarios into real or pretend.**

Further Help

If you are concerned that someone is excessively engaging in self-talk and pretend play, seek advice from a health professional.

If you feel someone needs support processing their emotions, please take a look at our emotional well-being resources.

References

Mental Wellness in Adults with Down Syndrome by Brian Chicoine & Dennis McGuire

A Practical Guide to Educating Learners with Down Syndrome by Rhonda M. Faragher

The information contained in this document is up to date as of September 2025 and is subject to change. To find the latest version go to downs-syndrome.org.uk

CONTACT US

Down's Syndrome Association

Langdon Down Centre,
2a Langdon Park, Teddington,
Middlesex, TW11 9PS

0333 1212 3007

info@downs-syndrome.org.uk
training@downs-syndrome.org.uk
downs-syndrome.org.uk

Wales
wales@downs-syndrome.org.uk

Northern Ireland
e. enquiriesni@downs-syndrome.org.uk



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