Can Pretend Minds Train Real Nuclear Minds?

How childhood imagination shapes future safety judgment in high-stakes environments.

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THE DATA

65%

Children with imaginary companions

Up to 65% of children under age seven have had an imaginary friend at some point, according to developmental research.

This widespread phenomenon is not a sign of psychological deviation but a universal developmental stage. Children who create imaginary companions are actively constructing mental models of independent minds—something critical in environments like nuclear operations where understanding another agent's intent is essential.



Source: Nature · Published November 17, 2026
https://www.nature.com/articles/d41586-026-03713-9

01

Imagination builds theory of mind

This suggests that early imaginative play may be a foundational, non-technical training ground for the cognitive flexibility required in nuclear operations, particularly during crisis simulation or emergency response.



02

Safety culture starts in play

In licensing and safety case development, regulators increasingly demand 'human-centered' design. The most effective safety arguments may not come from data alone, but from demonstrating that operators can mentally model complex systems as if they were sentient—just as children do with their imaginary friends.

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