

# So-So, my son's imaginary ... I mean invisible friend



I first met my son Ben's new friend two years ago. His name is So-So. We all like him very much. He's imaginary. No, excuse me, he's INVISIBLE, not imaginary. I've been corrected a million times. I should have that straight. So-So is a ghost and he became my son's friend shortly after Halloween when Ben came downstairs and asked for breakfast for the both of them.

"This is So-So, he loves oatmeal, just like me," he said as he pulled up a chair for him. I let So-So know right away that I'm the kind of mom who indulges her son's creative side. "Hello, So-So," I said as I bent down to shake his ghost hand, "I'm Mommy. Would you like some oatmeal?" Ben assured me he did.

Hmmm, invisible friend = invisible oatmeal. That was my thinking at least.

“There ‘ya go So-So,” I said as I set down a fresh bowl of pretend oatmeal. “Mommy! He wants real oatmeal!” Ben protested. “He’s REAL!” So fine, I made So-So some oatmeal. Ben secretly ate out of both bowls, then declared they were both full and they headed upstairs to play in Ben’s closet. (That’s where ghosts like to play best.)

“I wonder how long I’m going to have to keep this up?” I thought to myself as I polished off the remaining oatmeal from the bowls. Since then So-So’s brother, Knock-Knock, has moved it, he’s gotten married, he’s had 101 kids, he’s worked as head ghost at The Haunted Mansion at Disneyland, only to be fired for being “too scary.” He’s gotten in trouble more than once for playing “Back in Black” by his favorite band, AC/DC.

So-So has gone on vacation with us, hanging on tightly to the luggage rack as we’ve driven to Solvang, Arizona and Nevada.

Our whole family has come to love So-So. But, last week Ben, who’s now six, asked if we could have a private talk. So standing in Ben’s closet, with the door shut

tightly like a makeshift confessional, Ben said to me in a whispered voice, “So-So isn’t real mom. I just made him up.” I could tell he felt relieved finally getting it out.

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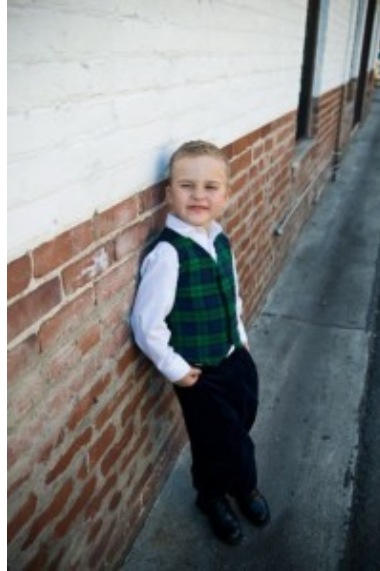
More stories about So-So:

So-So Marries Lou Lou

The Ghost in Him

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# Proud member: Mom of a boy club



Ben at age three

The longer I'm a mom, the more I think "mommy wars" are a contrived battle. Bottle vs. breast-feeding. Working mom vs. stay-at-home. Private vs. public school. I believe we moms have more in common than we do differences. We love our kids and want what is best for them, all the other choices are just that: different choices.

Being the mom of a boy instantly puts me in a group with other moms who all experience a lot of the same joys and trials that come with guiding a boy into manhood. We're like a little club.

When my son Ben was 3 years old, I was able to quit my full-time job and be a stay-at-home mom for him and his older sister, Emily. She was in kindergarten and that left the days open for Ben and me to spend time together – just the two of us. At that time we had Disneyland annual passes and we would use them to hit the park for short excursions like riding the Monorail around the park or eating lunch on Tom Sawyer's

Island. We would do just one little thing then head back to pick up his sister from school.

Some days were spent just running errands together. He would hold my hand and in his other hand he would carry his plastic bag of trains. We would go in and out of stores or to the post office or the dry cleaner. Some days we would drop Emily off and head straight home to cuddle on the couch and watch "Little Bear" episodes or "Thomas and Friends." It was our time and we cherished it like we knew it was going to be short-lived. And soon enough, he was off to kindergarten and I started back working part time. POOF! It was gone.

He and I still talk about that special time. He remembers it clearly and we both get dreamy eyed and misty just thinking about it. It's like our little secret. I can honestly say it was one of the happiest times of my life.

Little 3-year-old boys grow up and become young men. That special closeness that we once shared now is ... different, I guess. He is 10 years old and will still occasionally hold my hand when we're out and about, but only when no one is looking. Cuddling on the couch is reserved for when he is sick or maybe – if I'm lucky – on a special night. I miss our closeness, but know that where we are now is right and appropriate for his age. I have to let it go. It's the hard part of being the mom of a boy.

That is why a young mom caught my eye in the market a few weeks ago. She was obviously frazzled. Weighed down by the tasks, extra Christmas chaos and the sometimes mind-numbing monotony of being a mom of a young child. She was pretty, but hadn't spent even one minute on herself that day. Her yoga pants, most likely worn for comfort, had not seen a downward dog all day. Her young son – about age 3 – was whining. "Mooooommy, I want some nanas!" He was grabbing at the bananas that were just out of his sticky fingers' reach. Straining every muscle to get hold of one he kept saying "Mooooommy,

nanas!"

Her head was buried deep in her list of items she needed to find. She would go from scanning it to looking down the aisle back to her list. She was on autopilot. "Give me a minute, honey," she repeated to him over and over. She was patient and sweet, but with every "honey" she became firmer.

The boy eventually turned his efforts to grabbing at her jacket sleeve. "Mooommmmy, mommmmy mommy!" he repeated. She finally looked at him said "What do you want!" in an exasperated voice. "I want some nanas, mommy," he said sweetly.

She snapped out of it, smiled at him and placed a few bananas strategically out of his reach in the cart. "OK, for after lunch," she told him.

I honestly must have been standing there staring at the whole scene. She looked at me and gosh she looked tired. I took a few steps up to her and I said to her, "You're doing a good job." She smiled at me. Then I said what I swore I would never say to a mom with a young child because it seemed so patronizing, but it just came out, "It goes by so fast. Try to enjoy it. Before you know it this time will be gone and believe it or not, you will long for it."

With that, she burst into tears. Which of course, made me burst into tears.

So there we were. Two moms of boys hugging each other crying in the aisle between the nanas and the prepared hummus. I would do anything to have just one day with my son at 3 years old again. She would probably do anything to have one day with a 10-year-old boy who knows how to blow his nose and get his own snack.

We parted ways and I waved goodbye to her son who gave me a big smile and wave. You know the way little boys do, so cute.

“Mommy, who was that?” he asked her. “Just another mom,” she told him sweetly.

Originally published March 1, 2016



My baby, Ben, now.

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# So-So has been axed and other Disneyland news



It's been a tough week for the invisible people in our family. There's no way to sugarcoat this so I'm just going to come right out and tell you: So-So was fired from The Haunted Mansion at Disneyland for being "too scary."

You'd think that being a frightening ghost who says "WhooWhoo HaaHaa" to the little kids would make him an asset to his employers. But, when you swoop down and pick up a little boy and fly him all over The Haunted Mansion and leave him at The Magic Shop on Main Street without telling his parents that's where he should be collected, well, you get your pink slip pretty fast.

So-So has quickly recovered and now has an office job in Costa Mesa. He's the boss, but no one knows exactly what he does.

It has something that for sure involves making lots of copies and using a stapler. So, yep, he's a working hack now. A stuffed shirt. In this economy he was lucky to find anything at all.

Coco, So-So's dog, broke his leg last Thursday and spent the entire day at the veterinarian. When he got home we realized he couldn't jump up onto the ceiling fan, where he sleeps. I volunteered to give him a boost, but Ben just laughed and said, "Mommy, Coco is too heavy for YOU." So Ben had to hoist him up using two swords and marshmallow shooter.

The next head-spinning development is that Knock-Knock, So-So's brother, is now a girl. I didn't want to ask too many questions, so I just let that one go...

If you haven't the slightest idea what I'm talking about, you can click on these stories below to fill you in on So-So, my son's invisible friend.

A friend you can't see is a friend indeed  
The Ghost in him

Originally published January 0092

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# Who is this person pushing the Pringles on my kids?



After spending a week at my mom and dad's house with my family I was overcome with one, albeit immature, feeling: NO FAIR!!!

The first morning my mom had already prepared the breakfast table with every sweet delight that was banned from my house growing up – Fruit Loops, Frosted Flakes, enough sugar cereal to fuel a 5- and 8-year-old through more than a morning's worth of tantrums and meltdowns.

I know the topics of "Grandparents spoil their grandkids" and "Why do my kids get the foods I never got as a kid?" have been done to death, but this is a little different, because, frankly, it's happening to me.



In my family growing up, my mom filled the kitchen with the healthiest food the '70s had to offer: Roman Meal bread (instead of Wonder Bread), grape juice from concentrate (instead of soda), Red "Delicious" Apples (instead of fruit cups), Triskets (instead of chips), and, the worst travesty of all, Laura Scudder's Peanut Butter (instead of, you know, peanut butter). Laura Scudder's is the kind that has the oil sitting on the top that you have to stir in like some kind of cruel science experiment. It's thick and pasty and there is zero chance of not ripping your bread to pieces when spreading it. My mom has even admitted that she used to put wheat germ in our brownies as a "fiber booster." What kind of twisted ...

All this was done in the name of eating healthy, and to this day I think I have pretty good eating habits because of it (my man-food habit aside). I'm grateful to her for her efforts, and even though as a kid it seemed like my friends were eating Pop Tarts, Pop Rocks and Sugar Pops for breakfast, I knew she did it because she loved us.

So, I just want to know, who is this woman pushing the Pringles on my kids and what has she done with my mom?

My mom has taken on legendary spoiling status among our friends. We get requests to tell the same stories over and over again. Like once, after seeing Disney on Ice at The Honda Center, my mom bought Emily, my daughter, cotton candy on the way out the door after a whole parade of special treats during the show. When I protested, my mom shrugged it off and justified it saying cotton candy was "mostly air." **Mostly Air!** She's a legend. This is the sort of thing only a grandmother who is completely head over heels in love with her grandchild would say.

Which leads me to my husband and my stance on the whole subject – my own personal feeling of injustice aside – we think it's wonderful.

Our kids are lucky to have a grandma and gramps who love them and spoil them rotten. So many of my friends have lost one or both of their parents already, or their kids' grandparents can't be bothered with them, or they live too far away to see them.

It's not like they have no control at all. My parents require our kids treat them and each other with respect. They make them say "please" and "thank you" and they look after them like hawks, but they just can't help but be spoiled by them – and that's OK.

That our kids have grandparents that fill them with sugar, let them jump up and down on the couch, and even encourage them to bring frogs into the bathtub is all counted as a blessing in our minds. It also helps if they're the ones who are watching them when all this is happening, not us ... oh, it's an advantage if we have at least one day of "Grandma-detox" before school, piano lessons, or basically having to bring our kids out in public.

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Originally published June 2015

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## My Magical Son



When my son, Ben, was 6 he asked for one thing for his birthday: "A real magic kit." He tore open the package first thing in the morning and with an enthusiastic "Yes!" he pumped his fist to his side when he saw the little boy wearing a black top hat on the box. It was the gift – the only gift he really wanted, and now he had it.

Not waiting to show it to us, he ripped off the top and inspected his magic kit piece by piece, and with each one his face became more perplexed: a card deck with secret flaps, a top hat with a Velcro hiding place, a two-topped vase.

He waved the wand in the air a few times, hit it on the table in hopes of jump-starting it and then set it down. When he got to the directions, he held them up with his back to me and

said, "What is this for?" He then quickly turned to me and said with wet eyes, "This isn't a real magic kit."

My heart broke a little. You know how it does as a parent when you realize that a little bit of innocence just escaped through their footie pajamas out into space, never to be seen again. When he circled the magic kit in the catalog, he thought he would be getting – magic. Of course, he thought he was getting the ability to be magical – he would become magic. It never occurred to me that in his mind, magic was for sale for only \$35.99, plus shipping and handling.

Now comes the tough stuff in parenting: Can I frame his disappointment so it will hurt less? I've always been a firm believer in promoting the sprites of childhood imagination. Invisible friends? Bring them on! Santa? Yes, sir! The Tooth Fairy? She always leaves her fairy dust on their pillows. But I promised myself that when the time came, I had to come clean.

I told him the truth – mostly, that the magic he sees is really sleight of hand or illusion. It's a skill like playing music or dancing, I explained. After I showed him the first card trick and he performed it for his sister, he was hooked again.

He christened himself Bengee the Wonder-Full, and his sister made him business cards. We took the cape from his vampire costume, and his dad gave him an old briefcase to hold all of his tricks. Bengee the Wonder-Full's adopted catch phrase: "You wanna see some magic?"

After a week, he had 10 solid tricks in his repertoire and had received several standing ovations from friends and family. After a show, he and I sat on the edge of his bed, and I asked him how he felt about magic being different than he had expected. He said he liked his magic kit and performing, but his eyes turned watery again as he stared at his powerless

wand.

Walt Disney had a phrase he used to describe the little place of wonder, magic and belief that never entirely disappears in a person. He called it, "That fine, clean, unspoiled spot down deep in every one of us." I want Ben to stay that little boy who believes in real magic forever, for him to always have that "unspoiled spot" inside his heart.

"You know, to your audience you are magic," I encouraged him by lifting his chin with my finger. "You get to bring that to them just like you had hoped."

"Yeah, I guess you're right," he answered.

"Just think about how amazed they all were with your tricks, shaking their heads and clapping," I said. "I'm sorry this sort of magic isn't what you wanted it to be."

He started to perk up. "Yeah, but I still have Santa, So-So (his invisible friend) and the Tooth Fairy ... you know, all those guys."

Originally published February 2013

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## **Never (ever) Promise Anything to a Child (ever)**





Little Michael points excitedly from his stroller at King Arthur's Carrousel at Disneyland. His mom and I are chatting when she breaks away and says, "Yes, I see it! We'll go on that later."

Her words sound my parental alarm, and I grab her arm. With urgency I tell her, "No, don't ever promise a kid you're going to do something later. Are you crazy?"

It's a rookie mistake. Michael is 2, and he's her first. Good thing she has me to guide her through this hard-and-fast parenting rule.

Any experienced parent knows that a kid will remember and hold you to whatever you tell him he is going to do – especially something that (a) is fun or (b) tastes good. No matter what transpires, if you promise a child that you'll take him somewhere or let him do or eat something, he will bank on it. Without a doubt, it has to happen.

I'm absolutely certain that the children of the Titanic, as they were being rowed out on lifeboats while the "unsinkable" ship sank in front of them, whined to their weeping mothers, "But you said we were going to have ice cream tonight!"

This memory muscle doesn't work as well when telling them things such as, "We need to remember to stop at the bank," or "Don't let me forget to give you your antibiotics." You will have to remind them over and over again to brush their teeth. However, they have an ironclad memory for the good stuff.

It seems like a paradox that we teach our kids to commit, follow through and stand by their word – yet smart parents will never, ever commit themselves to a single thing. You check that luxury at the door of the hospital as you leave with your first child, along with the hope of ever appearing cool in your kids' eyes or being able to watch the evening news without bursting into tears. Those things just aren't going to happen. Being noncommittal is really good for the entire family.

Short of handing out a notarized statement declaring any future "promises" to be null and void if any of the following things occur – natural disaster, illness, something better on TV than "SpongeBob" or one or both parents hospitalized – just nixing promises from your vernacular for the next 20 years is your best bet.

Back at Disneyland, I try to help my friend by advising her to remember the following phrases: "We'll see." "I'm not making any promises." "OK, we'll add that to our list."

I tell her to write them down on a piece of paper. "Sleep with them under your pillow," I say. "Embrace them. I promise you won't be sorry." Well ... I mean, I don't promise, promise.

Originally published March 2015

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# Emily, Unwritten

My daughter Emily, who is six, made this decoupage dress form at The ARTbar on saturday.



I was so proud of her. I think it is just beautiful. I am trying to encourage her to explore her creativity and build on her natural interests. I really want her to be artistic and creative.

I am like one of those beauty queen stage moms, but instead of caking on the blue eye shadow and making her teeter around in heels, I am putting a paintbrush in her hand, parading Etsy in front of her and making her listen to Joni Mitchell. I just want her to have a place to go to relax and let her imagination flow.

The ARTbar is an excellent place to take any artistically inclined kid. They welcome them there happily. The girls that work there are very helpful, not to mention adorable and knowledgeable. So if you would like to venture out into the wilds of downtown Santa Ana it is worth the risk.

While there, grab a bite at Gypsy Den arcross the way from The ARTbar. It is classic bohemia with delicious food. If you like eating your lunch surrounded by old books, velvet and the smell of patouli oil, you will LOVE this place. Come on, be adventurous, I mean how many more Chopped BBQ Chicken Salads from California Pizza Kitchen can we eat? Don't we want our kids to know there are some restaurants that don't offer kid's menus and crayons?

Originally published Sept. 2007

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# Is there anything cooler than a five-year-old boy?



**Ben:** I was running so fast at school!

**Me:** Really?

**Ben:** Yeah, you know when you run so fast and smoke comes out the back of your shoes?

**Me:** Yes, that IS fast.

**Ben:** All my friends behind me were coughing and coughing because of all the smoke.

**Me:** Oh, my. You are a fast runner.

**Ben:** Yeah, really, really fast.

Originally published May 2009

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## How to use '80s music to annoy your kids and entertain yourself

I'm eight years into this parenting thing which is far enough along to develop a few..." tricks let's call them, no "tools"...to

help me get through the monotony, squimishes and repetitiveness that come with your mommy badge.

I think every mom has them, they are like little idiosyncratic things we moms do to keep ourselves from ... or help calm our nerves after answering the same question 45 times, or keep us from ... Kind of like inside jokes, really inside, like to yourself.

Because I am an eighties music connoisseur, or “geek” as some people might see it, mine revolves around lyrics from all the songs I used to enjoy long before I knew what a Diaper Genie was or could recite the book “Red Fish Blue Fish” by heart or catch a stray spitwad with my bare hands before it hit an innocent bystander—prekid.

The most gratifying thing about this tactic is the first 5 or 6 years of a kid’s life they have no idea what you’re talking about and then they hear the song on the radio. “Mom! That’s where you got that!” So initially, it just is annoying to them, then it becomes part of your family folklore.

Here’s an example of some of my most common lyrics used:

“Listen Mister, you’re living in your own private Idaho if you think you’re getting a special treat now!”

“Frankly Mr. Shankly, I don’t care what your friends are doing, you’re not going.”

“Freeze Fame! Stop right there!”

“You can ... if you want to you can leave your friends behind, cause if your friends don’t”

Looking at my grocery list “Look your kiss is on my list!”

“I don’t know the answer to that question, if I knew I would tell you.”

Originally published Aug 4, 2009

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# Five Things You Absolutely MUST Teach Your Teen About Social Media



Only a parent of a teen knows the struggle. Yes, there have always been struggles between parents and their teens, but to say that we are pioneers of a new kind of parenting isn't just our generation's attempt to minimize the tough time parents of hippies or greasers or, I don't know, Disney channel stars, have had to endure. We truly are parenting an entirely new kind of teen – the iGeneration teen. And it's hard.

I wrote often about parenting this unique generation in my column at the OC Register and I will continue to write about them here on my blog. Heck, I'm even writing a book about them. Out of necessity – my husband and I have one teen now and three more waiting in the wings – I have a vested interest in learning everything I can about today's teen.

Here are five things I have taught my teen to help her understand social media and its impact on her life, her future and others.

### **1.) Be careful what you say, there is no sarcasm font.**

Even though your teen may be “just be kidding” in a snarky text or comment or post, it’s important to teach teens that comedy can be taken the wrong way on social media. A sarcastic comment can hurt feelings or get them in trouble if taken out of context. Since there isn’t a sarcasm font that denotes they are joking around, it’s best to not risk it on social media.

### **2.) You are not responsible for what others say in a group chat.**

The group chat is a staple in the teen communication diet. They form groups of friends in group chats on text or Instagram. (Think modern-day Pink Ladies from the movie Grease.) Just like in a live in-person conversation, we talked to our teen about the way other kids use bad language or are just plain mean in some group chats. And just like in a real life situation, she isn’t responsible for what they are saying, but she does have the option to “walk away” or in social media terms – leave the group.

In one of the shining moments of my daughter social media life, she decided to leave one group that wasn’t a positive influence in her life. SHE decide. This is what we are going for here – our kids making these decisions for themselves. I sweated it out for a few weeks looking through the groups’ conversation but in the end, she made the decision to leave herself.

### **3.) If you share other people’s content – Ta-da! It’s now your content.**

The concept of sharing content by doing things like re-Tweeting, re-Vineing or reposting other’s content is a specific one to social media and may take parents a while to understand. Most social media channels give you the capacity to share other user’s content. Teach your teen that when she

does this, it is the same as if she were saying it, or doing it herself. For instance, if she re-Tweets something with foul language – she is using foul language. If she shares a Vine of someone doing something that is inappropriate, then she is endorsing it. Follow this rule up with real consequences. That will drive the point home to your teen – she shared it = she said it = bye-bye phone!

#### **4.) No screen-time is important time.**

In our house there is no screen-time after 8 p.m. No phone. No computer. At first this was hard for our older kids to take, but over time I think they enjoy the relief of not being tied to communication. We know as adults that it can be exhausting to always be checking emails and social media. You will get a fight if you don't have anything like this in place but I assure you, it is worth it!

#### **5.) It's rude to not respond to texts from friends and especially from \*ahem\* parents who pay for your cellphone.**

This one seems self-evident but every parent of a teen knows this struggle too well. You text your teen simple questions, a friendly "hi" or direction and you get a whole lotta nothing back. But you can see they seem to be posting on Instagram or texting other people or they respond only when they need something. Teaching a teen to have social media etiquette is an important lesson since this is the world they will be living in for the rest of their lives. When a friend asks about a homework assignment and she doesn't respond it is rude. When a parent sends a text and she doesn't respond it's unacceptable. Remember – without our help they won't have a phone. Use that power.

We truly are pioneering a new way of parenting. If you sometimes feel overwhelmed or at a loss for what to do it's understandable – parenting kids online and social media use was never modeled to us. The key is to be knowledgeable about

their social media life and make the best decisions you can for their well being. You read this whole blog post so you're doing GR8 ☐