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Barbie: Positive Role Model or Belittling Doll?

Many people think Barbie is a toy that is a positive role model for young girls. She is all about being yourself and following your dreams. What better way to teach children to grow up to become independent and competent leaders in society right? According to Justina Sharp, a fashion blogger and writer for The New York Times, Barbie is a legend. She talks about how adults try to give Barbie and other toys “adult issues.” For example, a common argument in reference to Barbie is that her body size is not an achievable body type by anyone. Some people perceive her as too skinny and not realistic. Sharp states, “this is not how little girls see Barbie” (Sharp). Often times, people put too much emphasis on the way a Barbie looks rather than what they can do for young girls. Barbies give girls the power to transport into another world. They allow girls the power use their imagination to create a perfect world for Barbie to live in. I agree with Sharp that adult issues should not be placed on young children’s toys; however, I believe that by creating this fake world, this can change a young girl’s perception on the real world. For instance, if a young girl spends all of her time playing with these dolls and creating different realms of which to live, she could begin to think her imaginations are reality. This, I would argue, is what could be most detrimental to a young girl for reasons of bad body image, creating a false reality, and encouraging common stereotypes that girls should not want to live by.

For instance, in an Equinox article that discusses whether Barbie is good or bad, the author talks about her own experience. I feel that she embodies most people’s opinion of Barbies. She shares that when she was younger she never really thought deep about Barbie and all of the hidden meanings, “Barbie was just a doll” (Roberts). The author then goes on to say that she can understand how some may fall under the spell of Barbie, “Perhaps some young girls have looked at Barbie and imagined looking like her. Perhaps in some of these cases, this desire has grown into unhealthy obsessions and girls have turned to extreme measures to transform their bodies to look like Barbie” (Roberts). Her next statement is how I think a lot of girls feel about Barbies, “But for me, this was never the case. For me, it was more about what Barbie had and what she had achieved that had more of an influence on me” (Roberts). When many people look at or think about a Barbie, they see an innocent doll that allows young girls to be who they want to be. However, people often miss some of the most important effects Barbie can have on a child. Body image and self-vanity issues are very real issues that can arise from playing with Barbies.

Another example in which some might argue that Barbie is a positive role model, could be in her common, underlying theme that you can do anything you put your mind to. This is a very encouraging message to send to children. Barbies can have that sense of empowerment in a young girl’s life. I remember that same feeling that I had when I was younger. Barbies were created to encompass the idea of one doll, but many outfits (Steinberg 208). Because these dolls have so many different occupations, they, of course, have many different outfits. Shirley R. Steinberg describes the many roles and occupations that Barbie herself can have, “Barbie has set records for changing vocations. [She has been] a nurse, a babysitter, a secretary…a doctor, a pilot, and a businessperson” (Steinberg 208). Steinberg accurately describes the way that children may view these dolls. Some young girls view Barbie as their role model, or even themselves. While playing with their Barbies, children take on the occupation of their choice. This encourages children to use their imagination to create a job for their Barbie to match the outfit. According to one mom in the popular group Circle of Moms, "I see them as a toy that promotes creative play" (POPSUGAR Moms). Barbies give children full control to be whoever they want to be, maybe even having an effect on the person they will become.

I would argue that Barbie is not a positive role model for young girls because she is associated with the common stereotypes of a perfect body size, pink, and a need for a man. Many people say that Barbie is the perfect size and has the perfect body. She, in fact, does not have the perfect body size. If she were real, Barbie would be very underweight (Roberts). I’m sure you’ve heard the argument about her “real dimensions” and how she would not be able to survive, and thought, that can’t be true. Well, according to an article by Neil Katz of CBS News, it is. He interviewed a student who researched life-size Barbies and made one. If she were real, Barbie would be five feet nine inches tall, her bust would be 39 inches, her waist would be eighteen inches, her hips would be 33 inches, and her shoe size would be a three. She would weigh 110 pounds and her BMI would be 16.24 which is classified as severely underweight. A BMI of under 17 is used to determine anorexia, which Barbie could easily have. If Barbie were a real person, she would have to walk her hands and knees because her proportions would not support each other (Katz). These numbers and facts are shocking to me. Knowing this, and knowing how many young girls desire, in vain, to look like a Barbie, it makes me wonder how society is presenting self-confidence to children.

Another factor that contributes to why Barbie could be perceived as a bad role model for young girls is the amount of pink in her life. Peggy Orenstein very clearly illustrated this in her book, *Cinderella Ate My Daughter*, “It’s not that pink is intrinsically bad, but it is such a tiny slice of the rainbow, and, though it may celebrate girlhood in one way, it also repeatedly and firmly fuses girls’ identity to appearance” (Orenstein 34). When you stop to truly think about the components of Barbie, or even most toys that have a market that is intended for young girls, they include glitter, clothes, other girly things, but most importantly, the color pink. Steinberg states that Barbie is, “a perpetual reminder to all that is good, wholesome, and pink in our lives” (Steinberg 211). Pink is generally a “girl color.” A lot of couples who finds out they are pregnant with a little girl run out to the nearest store and buy an assortment of pink toys, clothes, etc. They may think that all of the pink is cute, but I know that the color pink can get old after a while. I remember my parents being ecstatic when my favorite color was no longer pink. And even if parents do not want to subject their children to these common stereotypes, it is very hard to get around that in today’s time. In society, pink is used to identify things as “girl things,” and blue is used to identify things as “boy things.” I do think that today’s generation is combating these stereotypes and is working to abolish such a distinct separation in genders. Especially in today’s evolving and changing world, I’m not sure that Barbie fits in as a role model with what seems to be the new social norm of the LGBT+ community. In a world of homosexuals, the transgender community, and everything in between, I don’t know that Barbie could be the most appropriate person to model after. Also, she could be perceived as insulting to some people who are advocating for gender neutrality.

Something else that Barbie emphasizes that does not qualify her in my book as an appropriate role model, is her need for a man. Even when I was younger, I always thought it was so weird that Barbie and Ken always had matching outfits and I felt that they always needed to be together. I never understood why Barbie could not just hang out with her own friends and have a great time. From an early age, I think I was under the impression that if Barbie did not have Ken there with her, she would not be who she is. About a year ago, a Barbie book was published in which Barbie is a Computer Engineer. According to the Business Insider article, Barbie is “portrayed as an inept programmer who inadvertently plagues her friend’s computer with a virus and cant fix the bug without help from a man” (Lornez). I am not sure how I feel about this. On one hand, I grew up in a family in which the men do man stuff such as yardwork and fixing things around the house, and the women do woman stuff which includes cooking and cleaning. On the other hand, I am a firm believer that women do not need to rely on men for every small thing. Barbie sends mixed messages. In one instance, she is being an astronaut and saving the world, sending messages to be yourself, but the next, she is relying on Ken to fix the sink, sending a message of dependence upon men. For this reason, I think that Barbie is more of a negative role model for young girls.

At this point, I can understand why you might say, “These are just dolls” or, “You are reading way too much into this.” You would be right, these are just dolls that allow children to express their imagination. In the new ad to promote Barbies, young girls are placed in the fields in which they want to be when they grow up including, a veterinarian, a college professor, a businesswoman, and a soccer coach. At the end of the ad, Mattel came up with this clever line, “When a girl plays with Barbie, she imagines everything she can become” (Barbie). This is true, most girls do use their imagination to the max when playing with Barbie dolls. These dolls allow them to think about their future, and what they want to do with their lives. While these dolls can impact a young girl’s life in a positive way, they can also impact it in a negative way. In aspiring to be who they want to be, what if just being a businesswoman like Barbie turns into wanting to look exactly like Barbie, a size that is not achievable for a real person in a healthy way. While I agree with Sneha Vakharia in that, “The real magic of Barbie is in the hands of the little girls who hold her” (Vakharia), I also think that Barbie could be detrimental to young girls who are susceptible to such beliefs.

I’m not trying to say that no girl should ever play with Barbies. My point is that parents should be aware of the outcomes that could potentially develop in their child that are associated with these toys. In Steinberg’s article, she discusses the importance the proper outfit places on Barbie. Even something as simple as dressing Barbie in the prettiest outfit can have an effect on the way that young girls dress. She is aware that Barbie has the power to influence young girls and even wonders if her dolls had an effect on her, “Did Barbie construct this behavior, or do I just love clothes?” (Steinberg 208). After much debate and research, she concludes that she can, “single out only my fetish for “outfits” as a permanent influence a la Barbie. I hope that I remain untouched from other taint” (Steinberg 210). These taints could range from something as simple as a love of clothes, to a severe eating disorder. It is crazy to think that such a small innocent doll could potentially bring about such negative impacts on a young girls life. In cases of people who were anorexic in hopes of looking like Barbie, these situations could impact your life forever.

All of this matters because dolls really do have an effect on young girls. They have the power to influence their lives in a positive way, like determining a future occupation. However, they also have the power to impact their lives in a negative way, such as the desire to look like a Barbie. I think it is extremely important for parents to be aware of and understand just how important these effects can be on a young girl.

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