

How Barbie Was Too Cool and Got Expelled from Preschool

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Abstract

The Barbie brand is associated with sex appeal, lack of diversity, feminized occupations, racy fashions, and numerous stereotypes. Most of all, Barbie is known as a self-esteem bully. Based on information I gathered from direct observation of four different types of preschools, an extensive phone survey of Michigan preschools, interviews with directors from three different preschools, as well as a variety of scholarly and popular sources, this paper argues that Barbie should not be included in preschools. In Michigan, Barbie is not provided in a majority of preschools; however, 15% of the preschools I surveyed still have Barbie dolls. Old research from the 1980s suggests Barbie is the best doll to have, yet recent studies imply otherwise. It is now known that since Barbie has been around for 53 years, she has had more time to leave lasting effects such as sexualizing young girls, emphasizing racial discrimination, causing a discrepancy between reality and ideality, suppressing the pursuit of science careers, discouraging young girls to eat, and giving rise to human Barbie dolls.

How Barbie Was Too Cool and Got Expelled from Preschool

From the bleach blonde hair, tiny waist, long legs, dazzling blue eyes, emphasized eyelashes, full lips, accentuated breasts, to the glowing tan... Barbie is a sexy doll. However, many preschools do not have Barbie dolls for only this reason; the Barbie brand is associated with sex appeal, lack of diversity, feminized occupations, racy fashions, and numerous stereotypes. Most of all, Barbie is known as a self-esteem bully. Preschool is an educational setting where children get a head start in developing social skills such as interaction with their peers and teachers. My research suggests that interaction with Barbie dolls, from a young age, only pushes children further back instead of giving them a head start. Based on information I gathered from direct observation of four different types of preschools, one phone survey of Michigan preschools, interviews with preschool directors from three different preschools, as well as a variety of scholarly and popular sources, this paper argues that Barbie should not be included in preschools. This research paper offers recommendations for preschool directors who make decisions about what toys to incorporate into their preschool. I hope to provide them with statistics, research data, and reasons why Barbies should not be in preschool.

Literature Review

Some experiments and research suggest Barbie is a beneficial toy. Abraham and Lieberman (1985) concluded that Barbie dolls encouraged more facilitative behavior causing play sessions to be more socially active and productive compared to baby dolls. In addition, other research considers Barbie to be an interactive toy that only entertains children (Smirnova, 2011). Jesuvadian and Wright (2011) proposed that young girls use dolls as a tool to exhibit

empathy, especially when the doll and the child share similar features. Yet in the same article, they examined young girls' personal choices based on race with the use of dolls. However, these studies do not necessarily use objective measures, and some are outdated. The subsequent experiments were conducted in foreign countries that may not have the same Barbie exposure as the United States.

Furthermore, negative commentary about the Barbie doll was supported by other references. One experiment observed that after playing with Barbie, young girls had a tendency to eat less (Anschutz & Engles, 2010). This research was a replication of a previous study. In another experiment, Starr and Ferguson (2012) highlighted the sexualization of young girls due to sexy dolls such as Barbie. In that research, religion, media, and maternal influence were also considered presiding factors. At the same time, even if a mother tries with communicate to her daughter about Barbie's unrealistic proportions, there are many reasons why that information does not register with the child. One experiment found that children at the age of five had a tendency to believe more often what they saw, instead of what they were told (Ma & Ganea, 2010). For example, children may disregard what their parents say completely because of the recent media attention about the real life Barbie, Valeria Lukyanova, and children may believe a body image like Lukyanova's is achievable (*Living Barbie Doll*, 2012). Overall, Barbie has been a well known doll for 53 years, securing her spot in history (McDonough, 2010). Yet, Donald (2011) calls for a new role model to encourage young girls in better ways.

Methodology

My primary research consists of a direct observation, phone survey, and a series of interviews, all of which used objective measures, contained reproducible elements and maintained rigorous documentation. My secondary research is a combination of articles from scholarly journals and some popular sources. The research represents qualitative and quantitative data.

Primary research #1: Direct observation

For my direct observation, I went to Croswell Elementary in Romeo, Michigan; it used to be an elementary school, but now is a facility that contains many types of preschools. I was led through three different kinds of preschool rooms by the Director of Child Development, Debbie Padilla. We looked to see whether the rooms had Barbie dolls, and if so, how many. If Barbie was not found in the rooms, we then observed what other types of toys were used for dramatic play. By doing a direct observation, I gathered not only quantitative data as to how many types of preschools had Barbie dolls and how many there were, but also gathered qualitative data as well. As we walked through the rooms, not only did we look for Barbie dolls that were visible and out in the open, but we also searched for them in the play area. However, there could have been Barbie dolls in storage that were not visible to us.

Primary research #2: Phone survey

For more quantitative data, I conducted a phone survey. I called preschools in every county in Michigan, including the Upper Peninsula, totaling 83 preschools. I simply asked if there were Barbie dolls in a particular preschool. Out of the 83, 47 preschools provided me with a direct yes or no answer. The other preschools did not participate due to one or more of the following factors: the phone number was disconnected; no response to the voicemail I left;

or no one answered the phone. Since I used Google search to find the numbers for the preschools, some of the contact information may have been out of date.

Primary research #3: Interviews

Finally, I interviewed directors from three different preschools. I interviewed Benia Raczka, the director of Children's Choice Learning Center at Crittenton in Rochester, Michigan, in person on November 6, 2012, and then followed up via email the next day, November 7, 2012. I specifically wanted an interview with this preschool since it is associated with Crittenton Hospital. The second interview was over the phone with Kim Webber, the Assistant Director of the Shelby Township KinderCare on November 6, 2012. Since KinderCare is part preschool and part daycare, I was curious to see if that preschool had Barbie dolls since it has more of a play design instead of an educational one. Finally, I interviewed Dr. Julie Doneen, the Director of the Lowry Center for Early Childhood Education at Oakland University, on November 20, 2012. Since I already knew that Barbie dolls were not present in this preschool, I wanted to ask her more in depth questions to get a better understanding from a highly educated director's viewpoint. I was very interested in the Lowry Center because of its affiliation with Oakland University and its educational and diversity philosophy.

Results and Discussion

Findings from both my primary and secondary research deem Barbie as an inappropriate toy for preschools.

Direct observation

The three different types of preschools I observed during my direct observation varied by the amount of government aid that was provided which coincided with Barbie's presence.

Also, I noticed a variation in the toy collection between the newly formed sections of the preschool versus established sections. First Padilla took me through the Grade Start Readiness Program (GSRP). She said that the teachers needed to bring in their own toys because it was a grant based preschool where the curriculum was scripted by the state department, which did not provide aid for toys. In the newer section there were no Barbie dolls, just baby dolls and a writing center also used for dramatic play. However in the established GSRP, there were six Barbie dolls, one of which was a brunette. Also in this particular classroom there was a large Barbie head, where children can play with her hair (personal communication, November 15, 2012).

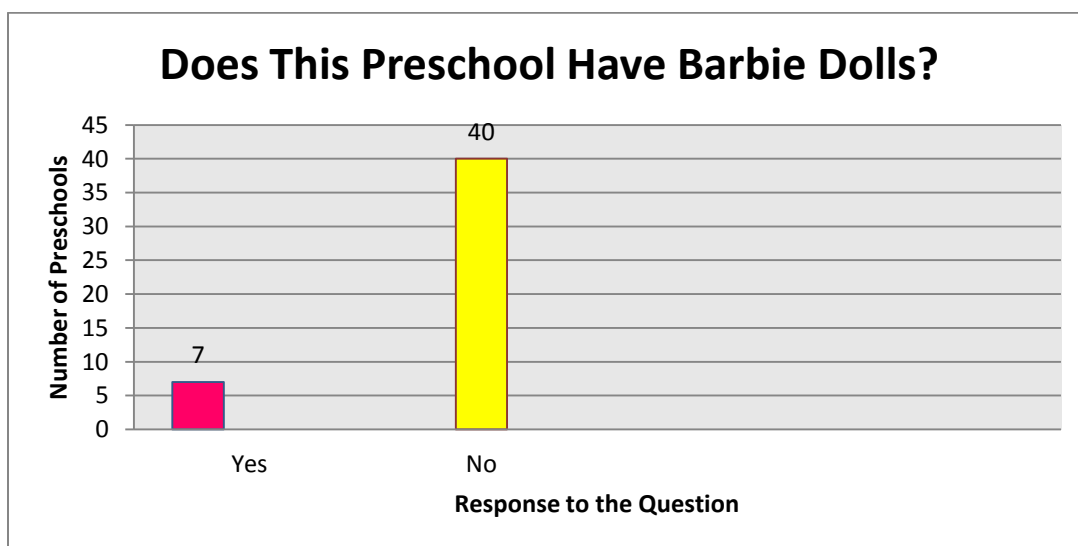
Then of the Early Childhood Special Education (ECSE) program, Padilla said this was more of a tuition based preschool that gets paid for having children. Since this program has been around for a while there were a lot more toys, but no Barbie dolls. For dramatic play, there was a kitchen for cooking, purses, vacuums, and muppets. The teacher in this classroom said that the children liked to play with baby dolls because then they could play mommy instead of just stripping down Barbie dolls. The teacher also noticed that the children enjoyed imitating and being mommy. What this teacher said contradicts research done by Abraham and Lieberman (1985) because based on their results, it was concluded that children preferred playing with Barbie dolls over the baby dolls. Since the teacher is with the children on a daily basis and is not only observing them over a six day time period, I found what the teacher said to be more substantial.

Lastly, Padilla took me through the Comprehensive Access to Parenting Service program which is a preschool where parents and children meet to form play groups and learn how to

play together (personal communication, November 15, 2012). Based on Abraham and Lieberman's (1985) study, it was concluded that Barbie dolls were the best doll to use for a group setting because, "children in the Barbie sessions were observed to share, make requests for help from each other, positively reinforce each other, and make mutual exchanges" (p. 14). However, there were no Barbie dolls in this preschool, just a big doll house, baby dolls, and figurines. In conclusion to my direct observation, when the teachers had to bring in their own toys, because the government only provided grants based on a strict curriculum, that is when Barbie made a presence. Otherwise Barbie was not in the other types of preschools at this facility.

Phone survey

Out of all the 83 preschools I called: 14 preschools were disconnected, 7 did not answer and had no voicemail, and 15 did not respond to my voicemail, leaving a total of 47 preschools that gave me a definite yes or no answer. Results from the phone survey appear below in Graph 1.



Graph 1: Preschools in Michigan reporting whether they do or do not have Barbie dolls

The phone survey shows that a majority of preschools do not have Barbie dolls. This may be due to various reasons that may be explained by previous researchers who have been conducting experiments as to why Barbie is not a useful toy. Anschutz and Engles (2010) concluded that after young girls played with Barbie dolls, they were less inclined to eat. Starr and Ferguson (2012) observed that young girls want to become sexier due seeing sexy dolls like Barbie. Jesuvadian and Wright (2011) analyzed how children as young as three are able to segregate themselves from different races, and how dolls promote such segregation. Lastly no matter how much parents or educators stress certain issues like eating disorders, body image, or race, Ma and Ganea (2010) observed that five year old children, in particular, tend to believe what they see and not what an adult tells them.

Interviews

From all of the information gathered from my interviews, there was a common consensus; Barbie should not be in preschools. Raczka (email interview, November 7, 2012) said that Children's Choice Learning Center at Crittenton does not have Barbie dolls. "We do more educational books and toys to get the kids prepared for Kindergarten," Raczka stated. "Kids can bring in toys for show and tell, however, there are enough toys within the facility so that they do not have to bring anything from home in case it gets broken or lost. Also for safety reasons." Safety was also an issue at KinderCare. Webber (phone conversation, November 6, 2012) elaborated that Barbie is not included because it creates safety hazards such as choking on small pieces like Barbie's shoes. Another explanation for Barbie's absence is that KinderCares cannot promote one toy over another, for instance Barbie instead of Bratz. But as Kim stated, "there is no solid answer."

However, the Lowry Center focused more on cultural diversity because it is a part of their mission and stated goal. Doneen stated that for dramatic play, “we focus on using many real materials... for example real pots and pans. We also provide dress up clothes that reflects [sic] a variety of cultures and traditions, as well as cooking tools used in diverse cultures.” Not only is this director concerned about diversity but body image as well:

Although more contemporary Barbies have started to represent cultural diversity, I would not say that they accurately represent how most women look... we chose other kinds of dolls and people figures instead... the ‘people figures’ are chosen to represent a range of cultures (email interview, November 20, 2012).

Doneen further elaborates some research that I discussed with her. In agreement with Starr and Ferguson’s (2012) research, she believes that the Barbie brand promotes an unhealthy body image, embraces materialistic standards, and leads to sexualized role play. Also in accordance with Donald (2012), Doneen does not believe that Barbie is a good role model because “it is important to provide many models of what it means to be a male, a female, to be smart, to be sensitive, etc. We know from years of research that young women were (at least historically) given the message that math and science were for males” (email interview, November 20, 2012). Overall, many concerns that Doneen expressed were shared by other directors, researchers, and preschool teachers worldwide.

My research suggests that Barbie is not in preschools due to many reasons. The doll is viewed negatively by educators and may harm young children. Reality and fantasy start to blur together for young girls, so by seeing thin dolls they assume that is what a real woman’s body should like (Anschutz & Engles, 2010). Hence, thin and sexualized dolls may lead to thin and

sexualized young girls. Even though parents try to communicate to their children about these issues, what children are told does not compare to what they actually see: a thin sexy Barbie doll (Ma & Ganea, 2010). With recent media attention about Valeria Lukyanova, this real life Barbie doll, I was curious to see if there was an increase of children asking for Barbie dolls. At the Croswell Elementary Preschool Program, Padilla informed me that more children have been asking for Barbie and now the staff is considering bringing in more Barbies. In comparison, at the Lowery Center, Doneen stated there have not been children asking for Barbie dolls recently. The location and demographics or cultural diversity of the community can explain the differentiation. Even though the phone survey was a yes or no question, two preschools said they used to have Barbie dolls but no longer have them. This real life Barbie doll can only enforce and instill an image of a human form Barbie, if the children are exposed to media, which could have a resonating effect on young girls.

This research is relevant to preschool directors determining what toys are provided. It is evident from my primary research that numerous preschools do not have Barbie dolls in their classroom because she does not meet the requirements of the curriculum. Both Raczka and Webber stated they do not have Barbie dolls because it is not a part of the curriculum that was determined by an educational department. Doneen specifies that,

The requirement for toys are primarily based on how open-ended and child-centered they are.... Teachers determine the materials and toys available, based on their knowledge of Developmentally Appropriate Practice and the High Scope Curriculum. The Key Experiences also guide how many materials are chosen, since teachers will provide toys that provide opportunities for development of language and literacy,

scientific thinking and concepts of classification, seriation, spatial relations, and time.

Social skills are a focus and toys are also chosen for how they promote cooperative play (email interview, November 20, 2012).

In correlation the purpose of Smirnova's (2011) article was to assess toys and form a list of requirements that promote child's imaginary play. The article defined a toy as, "an object that a child plays with" (p. 36) and that dolls are, "toys that personify an image of a person," (p. 37). Yet, since preschoolers are so young, they cannot establish a difference between what they play with and real life, "because they are naturally involved in their play and merge with it, they accept and adopt the character of the toy," (Smirnova, 2011, p. 38). Even though Barbie is good for imaginative play, dramatic play, and use of fine motor skills, my own research and research conducted by others suggest there are better toys to be used for child's play.

The harmful effects a toy may cause in children needs to be carefully taken into consideration when determining which toys are provided for preschoolers. Normally, a main deciding factor is the physical composition, what a toy is made of, like the type of plastic or amount of lead, which may explain why in each classroom I observed wooden toys. However, there needs to also be an in depth analysis of what the toy represents and the psychological issues it may cause. If preschool directors knew that Barbie was originally modeled after a sexualized doll and envisioned as "a doll onto which girls could project their desire to act like, and indeed become grown women" they probably would not want their children playing with that kind of doll (McDonough, 2010). Directors may already be aware of the negative connotations associated with the Barbie doll. They may be unaware, like Doneen, about how young women, like Valeria Lukyanova, surgically transformed themselves to fit the Barbie mold.

It is speculated by surgeons that Lukyanova spent hundreds of thousands of dollars for breast enhancements, excision of ribs, widened hips, and other facial alternations in order to look like Barbie, (*Living Barbie Doll*, 2012). It is bad enough that media is broadcasting this real life Barbie doll, because it gives young girls the idea that the Barbie image is possible. But by having Barbie continue to make an appearance, especially in an educational setting like a preschool, it only instills the image of a thin sexy doll even more in young girls' minds. Therefore, Barbie should not be looked to as a role model, but as a bad influence. From here on out, Barbie dolls should be expelled from preschools.

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