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Diversity in Dolls: Not Child's Play

“Why aren't there any dolls that look like me?” is a phrase no parent wants to hear when letting their child choose a doll at the toy store. Unfortunately, this painful reality is a common experience for many children of color. Not being able to find a doll that reflects their appearance causes children of color to wonder why they aren't good or pretty enough for a doll to be made to look like them and causes them to question their place in the world when they don't see themselves represented with the same exposure as their white peers. It hurts the child and often leaves a lasting impression that affects their self-esteem. Historically, children of color had no choice but to paint their dolls to match their skin tone because manufacturers simply did not make dolls which reflected them racially. Children should not still have to be subject to a lack of representation in doll options in the present day. Having racial diversity in children's dolls is important because kids being able to see themselves represented in the toys they play with can positively influence their self-image and can help them learn to be more accepting of others.

Playing with racially diverse dolls can help children of color improve their self-esteem. In an article on Metro Parent, Detroit writer and mom of two Mori K. Anderson recounts a personal story of taking her daughter to the store to pick out a new doll: “What was meant to be a quick trip to Target turned into a 45-minute trip, as we went to two different stores, only to find one brown baby doll, which she already owned.” She further explains that she was met with “tears and disappointment” from her daughter as she “[struggled] to explain” (Anderson) why there



A Black girl is unable to find a non-white doll at Target

were no dolls that looked like her and why they eventually were forced to order one from Amazon. When children are unable to find a doll that looks like them among the many dolls with blonde hair and blue eyes guaranteed to be available, it makes them feel invalidated during a critical developmental time of their lives when they are discovering and forming their self-identity. Being able to

identify with a doll increases childrens' self-esteem, which

in turn reduces distress about the validity of their appearance and helps to improve their mental health.

The issue of lack of diversity in dolls not only affects children of color, but can also affect how they are treated by others later in life. For children, play is a reflection of real life. It is common for kids to use dolls to act out scenarios they see in their everyday lives, such as going to a party, getting ready for the first day of school, or 'playing house' by mimicking family dynamics. In a study for Barbie, neuroscientist Dr. Sarah Gerson and her team from Cardiff University's Center for Human Developmental Science found that when children play with dolls,



Two sisters happy with their dolls

it activates the region in the brain used "when we think about another person's thoughts or feelings." This indicates that playing with dolls that represent diverse races and cultures "[encourages] children to think about other people and how they might interact with each other," effectively helping them "rehearse" the social skills and empathy that will be essential to them later in

life (Savas). This indicates that if a child is only exposed to white dolls in their youth, they may be less comfortable when engaging with people who look different from them because they were not given the opportunity to act out interactions with a diverse collection of dolls during playtime. Since playing with dolls allows kids to explore how they would interact with others, having a diverse range of dolls available for children to play with is extremely valuable in developing their empathy for others.

Some may argue that toy companies have already done enough in terms of offering dolls with greater racial diversity. For example, 18-inch doll company American Girl's selection of dolls typically features an overwhelming number of dolls with light complexion, blonde hair, and lightly colored eyes, while only a few options are offered for dolls representing non-white ethnicities. In 2017, the company took a step in the right direction by introducing their *Create Your Own* line, which allows customers to create a unique doll by customizing each feature of the doll,



An undiverse display of American Girl Dolls

selecting from a range of options for features such as face shape, skin tone, eye color, and hair texture. A main selling point of this line is the ability to customize a one-of-a-kind doll that can be designed to closely resemble any child, specifically POC kids who likely do not already have a lookalike offered from American Girl. Although great improvements have been made by doll companies in terms of offering more options for racial diversity in recent years, these options are often still not easily accessible. With American Girl's *Create Your Own* dolls, each custom doll is priced at \$200, which is almost twice the price of a regular American Girl Doll. ("American Girl Debuts Custom Doll...") Considering the plethora of white dolls available to choose from at

American Girl, it is not fair that a white child has the luxury of walking into a toy store and immediately finding a doll that resembles them, while a POC child is forced to custom order and pay twice the price for a doll that also looks like them. This inequality is why companies still need to take further action in assuring they provide an accessible range of racial diversity in their selection of dolls.

Racial diversity in dolls is formative in influencing a child's self-esteem and children's behavior towards people different from them. With the racism that children of color will inevitably face in their lifetimes, dolls that reflect their identities serve as positive reminders to them that they are worthy. Doll companies need to be more conscious of the diversity of dolls they offer and of the responsibility they have to the development of children's self-image by listening to the requests and critiques of disappointed adults and children. Although improvements have been made to be more inclusive today, there is still a long way to go before every child is able to enter the toy aisle and see a miniature representation of themselves on the shelf.



A Black girl enjoys playing with a doll that resembles her

Works Cited

Savas, Nicole. "Barbie Study Says Playing with Dolls Helps Kids Develop Empathy, Social Processing Skills." *The Toy Book*, 1 Oct. 2020, <https://toybook.com/barbie-empathy-study/>.

[Author Credentials] Nicole Savas is an author and Editorial Assistant for the Toy Book Magazine, the Toy Insider, and Pop Insider. She is consistently informed on current topics in the toy industry.

[Audience/Type of Information] This article on the Toy Book website is meant for adults and children interested in learning about current topics in the toy world and toy industries.

[Purpose/Bias/Point of View] The author and the Toy Book website seek to inform the public on news in the toy industry without bias.

[Currency of Source] This article was published in October of 2020, meaning it is recent and relevant to the current world. The science and findings of the study are not outdated.

[Relevance to Paper] This source covered the study from Barbie and Cardiff University on how playing with dolls helps kids develop empathy. This helped me provide solid scientific evidence to support my claim that diversity in dolls is important for the development of empathy in children.

Anderson, Mori K. "The Importance of Racial Representation in Toys." *Metro Parent*, 19 Aug. 2020,

<https://www.metroparent.com/parenting/talking-about-race/the-importance-of-representation-in-toys/>.

[Author Credentials] Mori K. Anderson is an author at Metro Parent and a Black mom of two, making her a credible source to discuss topics on parenting and race.

[Audience/Type of Information] This article by Metro Parent is meant for parents looking to read articles on parenting and education for their children.

[Purpose/Bias/Point of View] Metro Parent seeks to inform parents on topics such as advice on parenting, educating their children, and discussing the challenges of parenting without particular stances or biases.

[Currency of Source] This article was published in August 2020, making it a relevant and recent source.

[Relevance to Paper] This article discussed the importance of racial representation in toys and included a personal anecdote from the author, which I was able to cite as a first-hand account of POC children not being able to find dolls that look like them in stores.

“American Girl Debuts Custom Doll and Apparel-Making Experience with

Never-before-Released Options and over One Million Design Combinations.” *Mattel, Inc.*,

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