

The Slippery Slope to Barbie

by Lisa Oram

I never had Barbies when I was a kid. My mom believed that girls should play with girl dolls, not woman dolls, so my sisters and I got Fluff and Skipper, Barbie's flat-chested, younger sisters. We had vinyl carrying cases with silver clasps that housed these dolls and their myriad accessories. We enjoyed playing with them, but longed for the real thing: Barbie with her pointed toes and tiny waist.

By the time my first child was born 30 years later, I had moved far away from those childhood wishes. I was a grown-up feminist with a new respect for my mother's choice. Barbie was symbol of bad body image, excess commercialism and heterosexual assumption.

And then, just after her fourth birthday, my daughter declared her utmost, heartfelt desire for a Barbie. She had seen Barbies, and occasionally played with them at other people's homes, but she had not yet figured out that having one herself was possible. Then, her best friend got one as a birthday present from a neighbor. And her cousin got one for Christmas from their shared grandmother. It was a like a light bulb went off—Barbies came from real people like her very own May May. My daughter wanted one—and fast!

So, there I was, perched on the slippery slope to Barbie. Where did I stand, exactly?

I started talking with other mothers. Looking back, my mom said, it just didn't matter that much. She figured I hadn't turned into a better or worse person as a result of the no-Barbie policy. A mom from the preschool said that she had Barbies as a kid, and see, no body image problems or issues with men. Wink. Wink.

Lastly, our friends, Joan and Jane, whose feminist and lesbian politics didn't preclude their seven-year-old daughter from having a huge collection of Barbies, said they are choosy about what they forbid. Guns are out, as are words like stupid or hate, but they didn't see Barbie as dangerous, especially if they gave their daughter an enormous world of other, more healthy images. Bottom line, they said, "We are repelled by Barbie, but we are more repelled by parents who forbid their children from playing with things they love."

Barbie was coming into perspective, somewhere between my fear of her perfect figure and the leftover longings of my youth. Maybe it would be fun to have a few Barbies....

So, I took the plunge and laid out some cash for Sleepover Barbie. The set came with spaghetti strap PJs, a plastic bowl of popcorn, a sleeping bag, sneakers, shorts, and a t-shirt. There was, as far as I could tell, no immediate moral or physical disintegration in the days following Barbie's arrival in our home. Rather, my daughter was delighted, and I was a hero.

Months later, when we were dressing Barbie in a sleeveless sundress and sandals bought with allowance money, I asked casually, "Do you know anyone who looks like Barbie?"

"It's just pretend, Mom," my daughter answered.

"Do you think Barbie is comfortable in those shoes?" I persisted.

She rolled her eyes.

When my daughter was a baby, I resisted dressing in her in pink, but pink has become, passionately, her favorite color. When she was one, I was shocked to look around and realize how few trains, trucks, and cars we had. I rounded some up and added them to her playthings, but she never showed much interest. After skating lessons recently, I suggested that she might want to play hockey when she learns to skate better.

"No thanks," she said, "I just want to twirl!"

What sticks and what doesn't? Is it what I am or what I'm not that most influences her? I just don't know, but I love that she loves twirling her body on the ice. And she loves Barbie because she thinks she is pretty.

For my daughter's fifth birthday, my mother bought her Birthstone Barbie, complete with a sparkly, ankle-length gown, topaz jewelry, and a very complicated hairdo. But, all is not lost. Mostly, I find her Barbies (there are four now) littered around the house, half-naked and half-forgotten, among way-too-many other toys. Nothing, in fact, is lost, except a tiny plastic shoe, here and there.

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