

Does she encourage thinness?

[Life](#), [Emotions](#)



This essay examines the question of whether the iconic “ Barbie Doll” (“ Barbie”) causes young (5-8 year old) girls to desire thinness, thereby detrimentally effecting their self-image. Barbie, introduced to the children’s market in the 1950s, is a 9-inch doll created with what are widely regarded as imaginary proportions. Concern over the adverse effects of Barbie on children growing, Barbie’s figure was recently changed to reflect, among other things, a smaller bust and wider hips. Nevertheless, the controversy still remains: Does Barbie contribute to or even create negative body images in young girls?

II. The Concerns: Barbie as Destructive Force Concerned parents and adult women who themselves were affected by the body size and shape portrayed by America’s favorite doll have expressed fear or conviction that playing with Barbie dolls may or does lead to a panoply of image-related problems in the youth who play with them. Little best examples the detrimental results of Barbie on children than the reputed decision of one adult woman to request that a plastic surgeon recreate her body and face to mirror Barbie’s.

When examined closely, however, the woman – and, eventually, society – learned that Barbie, if created as a human being, would have feet too small to balance her body on, breasts too large to be supported by her tiny waist, and hips likely too narrow to bear children. Indeed, Barbie could literally never exist in reality. At core, those opposed to Barbie for image-related reasons posit that girls at particularly vulnerable ages are easily impressed upon by the doll they come to not only play with, but idealize. Those girls wish not only to do all the things Barbie does – become an astronaut or doctor – but look like her.

While becoming an astronaut or doctor are attainable goals for most if not all young girls, achieving Barbie's looks is not. Were Barbie not important, she would in fact have little if any effect over her fans. III. Why They Have Their Point Though Barbie may not be responsible for the destructive force many attribute to her, concerned parents and former Barbie fans do have their point: Women do not look like Barbie dolls. Though an ultimate compliment may be, "You're so pretty – you look like a Barbie," in reality Barbie paints a picture of women that does not accurately reflect nature.

For children particularly, impressions are easily made at tender ages, when bodies have yet to develop and knowledge is limited. Therefore, the five- or six-year old child, who has little reason to know otherwise, will be prone to accepting Barbie's figure and appearance as a true reflection of what she will one day become. The detrimental effects may be especially harsh on children without mothers or sisters in their lives, or children in families who perpetuate negative self-images via perpetual dieting or other behaviors.

For those children – the ones who arguably need the most direction – they may "look to" Barbie for more and as a result shape their own self-images around her. IV. Anti-Barbie: A Correct Assumption Underlying the Barbie dissenter's opinion is the assumption that Barbie's fans are easily impressionable and that Barbie has enough power in their lives to effect self-perception. Little argument can be made as to the former assumption (few would dispute that 5-year-olds are easily manipulated); and, though there is room for doubt as to the latter proposition, popularity attests to Barbie's frontrunner status in the children's market.

Year by year, Barbie is consistently a favorite among young girls, and over time has evolved from teen fashion model to wife to mother to careerwoman. Throughout all, her figure has remained unscathed, sending the perhaps subconscious message to the girls who idealize her that they, too, will look forever young and thin no matter how old they grow or how differently their bodies may be made. It is Barbie's enduring popularity that makes her so central a figure in the lives of so many.

V. Why Barbie Works Despite Her Flaws

Despite criticism, Barbie may in fact little harm a young girl's self-image. She is, after all, just a doll. Few girls are told, or even given the suggestion, that Barbie is a true reflection of women's bodies or lives. Barbie no more accurately reflects women's bodies than does Ken accurately reflect men's, and she is not designed to. Barbie, rather, is a tool of escape. Children of ages five, six, and even eight and ten seldom if ever would be found focusing on Barbie's proportions or dress size. They, rather, use her as a tool with which to engage in fantasy.

Beyond this, while Barbie may be the most popular girls' toy, she is far from the most determinative factor on a young woman's self-image. Most girls discontinue Barbie play well before their adolescence, the time when most young women begin focusing on and comparing their bodies with others. The force of society on a girl's self-image cannot be underplayed. To assign Barbie with greatly influencing a girl's view of her body when she is bombarded with images of real girls in popular culture who are unnaturally thin (on television, in magazines, in film) is to assign to her more importance than she in fact has.

While Barbie lives in the world of fantasy and toy, images of super-thin models and women abound in an adolescent's very real world – in the magazines she reads and on the television programs she watches. In many instances, the superstars and celebrities she looks up to are unnaturally thin and encourage her to dislike her own body. Perhaps more importantly, a young girl's friends and family likely have far more influence on a girl's perception of herself than Barbie.

If a girl's mother is comfortable with her body, she will likely instill similar comfort in her daughter. If, in contrast, a girl grows up hearing her mother perpetually complain that she (the mother) is fat or otherwise inadequate, she may well internalize such thought process and apply it to herself. Peers, too, who complain that their bodies are inadequate in one form or another may cause self-doubt in a girl. VI. A Balance: Healthy Barbie Though Barbie may not have the effect on her fans that her critics assign to her, it

is likely that she does have some influence over her audience. Barbie, a staple of the toy world, doubtless plays her part in society and in shaping the goals, values, and self-images of those who play with her. To some extent, Mattel, Barbie's creator, has recognized and attempted to remedy some of the potential damage Barbie's surreal figure may do on young girls by slightly changing her mold. Mattel, however, can do only so much, and even the doll sold today paints a false picture of what most girls will mature to look like.

Short of Mattel creating a Barbie that comes in all different shapes and sizes, parents in particular can use their influence to minimize any ill-effects Barbie may potentially have. Children should be taught that bodies do not come in

standard sizes, and that it is important to have a positive view of yourself no matter how you are built. For some households, this may entail limiting or completely erasing Barbie from the toy mixture. More ideal, however, would be to tell children that they are beautiful and fine, and that Barbie is what she is marketed as: Just a toy.