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UNIVERSITY OF MAINE

In the Spotlight

COLLEGE OF EDUCATION & HUMAN DEVELOPMENT

Whatis Really new about Barbie's New Friend?

by Jim Artesani

Barbie has a new friend. So what, you ask? Why has this new doll caught the attention of the national news media? Because Barbies friend has a disability. She uses a wheelchair. She is purported to be a symbol of diversity.

We all know that Barbie and the people who work for her at Mattel have taken their share of heat over the years, primarily because of the image Barbie portrays as well as those she does not. I think it is safe to say that most people do not associate Barbie with diversity. The purpose of this commentary, however, is not to find fault with Mattel or the effervescent Barbie. Personally, I am pleased that the Mattel company has chosen to diversify in this manner.

We know that young children use play and fantasy as a primary means for learning. Through play, children increase their knowledge, deepen their understanding and strengthen their problem-solving skills. Given the widespread and enduring popularity of Barbie dolls, the creation and impact of a Barbie with a disability is worth examining.

In his book, *No Pity*, Robert Shapiro reminds us that people with disabilities represent the largest minority group in the United States, a minority anyone can join. In fact, the longer an individual lives, the more likely it is that he or she will become a member of this minority. People with disabilities are an integral part of mainstream American society. Whatever our race, creed, color, vocation or lifestyle, each us could have a disability - today or in the future. Even if we do not, we most certainly will encounter people with disabilities in our daily lives. If children's play incorporates aspects of disability, perhaps they can begin to see how people with disabilities contribute to the strength and richness of our society.

What will children learn from this toy? First, let's start with the name of this new line of dolls. They are called "Share a Smile Becky." People with disabilities are not happy and smiling all the time. One of the most common traits associated with children who have Down's Syndrome is that they are "good natured." This is a stereotype. It cheapens and demeans the character of people with disabilities. It reduces them to one-dimensional caricatures, and perhaps serves to make the rest of us more comfortable. The name "Share a Smile" encourages children to view people with disabilities in a simplified, one-dimensional manner that is erroneous.

One-dimensional characterizations are a theme that has been played too many times by the media. How often have we seen people with disabilities portrayed as "pitiable" and "in need of our donations" or as role models and worthy of outlandish praise for accomplishments made "despite" their disability. While the intentions may be good, the

result is often harmful. So, let's allow the kids to decide if Barbie (or Becky) is happy or sad just like they do with their other dolls. Maybe there will be times that Becky just doesn't feel like sharing a smile.

Despite the negative implications of the name, Mattel tells us that Becky and her wheelchair will increase children's understanding of disability and "help dispel uneasiness some people have around those with disabilities." So why do we only see and read about the reactions of children with disabilities and their parents to the doll? Certainly these children and parents do not need a doll to help them understand the issues related to having a disability. However, if the doll is to have an effect on non-disabled children who may feel uneasy around people with disabilities, Barbie will need to be marketed to this group. Ideally, the Saturday morning cartoons would be interrupted by commercials featuring children with and without disabilities, playing with dolls with and without disabilities.

How will children play with Becky and her wheelchair? What will they learn from these experiences? What are the potential benefits of such a doll? Is it a progressive step towards increased understanding of diversity?

Let's examine some concrete ways children without disabilities may benefit from Becky. Let's imagine that a young child is playing with Becky who is borrowing Barbie's van to go to the mall. The child rolls Becky's wheelchair up to the Barbie van, but wait. There is no lift! So maybe Becky does what many people who use some of the newer high-tech wheelchairs do. She transfers from the chair into the front seat of the van, takes the chair apart, puts it into the seat next to her and drives off. But wait again! Has the van been adapted to fit Becky's special needs so that she can maneuver it?

Now, imagine that Becky visits the Barbie play house. Is there a ramp? Are the doors wide enough to accommodate the wheelchair? How does she get in? Are there cut-aways under some of the kitchen counters so she can help make dinner? How will Becky get the her favorite CD off the top shelf?

Am I being facetious? Of course, but these are just a few of the issues a real person with a disability may encounter. If Barbie's new friend is going to help increase children's understanding of disability or reduce their uneasiness around people with disabilities, this doll will need to encounter some of these "reality-based" issues. These are the situations that turn a disability into a potential handicapping condition. The real issue here is that Becky may have a disability, but unless the child's play incorporates some level of reality, Becky may never experience the potential barriers that disabled people face in a largely inaccessible world.

I do not have any conditions that would fall under what our society typically would define as a disability, and I have never owned a Barbie doll. In a society that has long endorsed the sale of Barbie dolls, I do not have a problem with one of them having a disability. I do take issue with the notion that a doll can convey the complexities of a disability or any other aspect of diversity by itself. For this to happen, PARENTS and other adult caregivers need to be involved. It is our responsibility to ask the right questions while our children are playing, to encourage them to think about the challenges a doll or real person with a disability might encounter, and to problem-solve around those challenges. Moreover, we must facilitate discussions about the strengths, skills and abilities people with disabilities possess.

With guidance, children can learn that people with disabilities are multifaceted individuals. Like all people, they have different strengths, needs, interests and moods. If

this type of education occurs within the play setting, then perhaps this Barbie can be more than just a pretty face.

(Jim Artesani is an assistant professor of special education at the University of Maine. A specialist in transition services and severe disabilities, his work is directed toward improving the school/ community/workplace environment and opportunities for people with disabilities).

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