

Dolls

and doll play:

A new look at a familiar prop

Dolls have been a fixture in dramatic play centers for decades. Despite changing doll styles and increasing doll gadgetry, experienced teachers continue to recommend simple and realistic dolls for pretend play.

Why do baby dolls beat out Barbies®? How can you use dolls to support children's learning and development? When you buy dolls, what do you look for?

Dolls in children's play

Playing with dolls is basic to dramatic play. The roots of make-believe begin between 12 and 18 months of age. During this time, children start to use objects as symbols and imitate behaviors (Rogers and Sawyers 1988). For example, 16-month-old Josh pretends to talk on a toy telephone.

True doll play begins about age 2 (Bronson 1995). Toddlers begin to talk to dolls, feed them, and tuck them into bed. Later children assume roles for themselves, beginning with the most familiar, mommy and daddy. Andrea

plays mommy, for example, and says to baby, "Eat your peas."

As role playing becomes more comfortable, children learn to play more than one role at a time. For example, David not only plays daddy but also speaks for baby: "Time for bed." "No, I'm not sleepy."

By age 4, children are playing cooperatively with peers. They use dolls to act out family and school roles. They also act out roles they have observed, either real or fantasy, such as doctor, firefighter, and Cookie Monster®.

In kindergarten and the primary school years, children play with all kinds of dolls and engage in elaborate fantasy play. Doll play increasingly becomes something only girls do. "[C]ompared with girls, boys prefer toy guns, adventure fantasy play, and video games with aggressive themes, whereas girls prefer household objects, enacting familiar roles, and dolls" (Goldstein 1994).

According to experts, pretend play is common to all children, with at least one exception.

Children with autism have a neurological disorder that impairs imaginative play and social interaction (Autism Society of America).

Benefits of doll play

Pretend play, of which dolls are a part, benefits all areas of development. By dressing and feeding dolls, children enhance fine-motor skills. By assuming roles and interacting with other children, they practice language and social skills, including sharing, cooperation, helping, and problem solving. They learn the different roles people play and begin to see their own place in the world.

Children have a fundamental need to bring the large, loud world into manageable size, according to Jerome Singer, psychology professor at Yale University (1994). Pretend play gives a child "a miniature world of downsized objects and people where she is the giantess and the trucks, cars and airplanes are easily manipulable. She can reshape



Guidelines for appropriate dolls

Child's age: Infants

Doll type: Soft, cuddly dolls with simple, one-piece bodies (rag dolls), painted or molded hair, and no detachable parts. May have rattle inside. Lightweight, washable dolls that can be grasped from any angle, with bright colors and sharp contrasts—emphasis on face and especially eyes. Skin colors that represent children's varied ethnicities.

Doll size: 8-13 inches

Clothing: Sewed or painted on

Accessories: None

Child's age: Toddlers, age 1

Doll type: Cloth and vinyl baby dolls, soft and cuddly, no moving eyes. Skin colors and facial features that represent children's varied ethnicities.

Doll size: 8-13 inches, small enough to hold and carry around with one hand

Clothing: Simple clothes, either detachable or sewed or painted on. Diapers with hook-and-loop or adhesive tape (no pins).

Accessories: Doll cradle (sturdy enough for a child to get into) and blankets

Child's age: Toddlers, age 2

Doll type: Washable baby dolls. Skin color and facial features that represent children's ethnicities and cultures.

Doll size: 12-15 inches, easy to hold, and fits comfortably in child's arms

Clothing: Simple clothes (nightgowns, diapers, shirts) with easy closings (hook-and-loop, snaps)

Accessories: Doll cradle, blankets, bottles, and other feeding items

Child's age: Preschool (3-5 years)

Doll type: Washable, realistic baby dolls with distinct arms and legs. Dolls that look like children to encourage role play. Generic rather a specific character. Skin colors, hair, and facial features that represent the diversity of the community.

Doll size: 12-15 inches as well as miniatures

Clothing: Assorted clothes (shirts, pants, dresses) with easy closings, including items that represent diversity

Accessories: Cradle, blankets, bottles and other feeding items, carriage or shopping cart, child-size rocking chair. Props that represent disabilities such as wheelchair, hearing aid, and eyeglasses.

Child's age: Primary school (6-8 years)

Doll type: Baby dolls to bathe and diaper. Child dolls that encourage "playing school" and fantasy play. Skin colors, hair, and facial features that represent community diversity.

Doll size: All sizes, from miniatures to 18- to 21-inch dolls

Clothing: Lots of clothes for baby dolls (booties, bonnets, bibs) and child dolls (shoes, socks, dresses, nightgowns, pants, shirts, jackets), including items that represent diversity.

Accessories: Same as for preschoolers (above), with additional items such as diaper bag, bed linens, baby powder (empty).

Adapted from *The Right Stuff for Children Birth to 8*, by Martha B. Bronson

her own bedtime or feeding experience with the help of some props we adults can offer—dolls, toy beds, or toy kitchen tables. She can come to grips with what are often major crises, such as a battle over feeding or messy toileting, but 'writing' the scenarios herself and putting dolls into the now miniaturized situations and experiencing the power of watching them suffer as she pretends to be Momma."

Doll play allows children to work through strong emotions. Hallie Speranza, who teaches at the Priscilla Pond Flawn Child and Family Laboratory, the University of Texas at Austin, says doll play can be therapeutic. Sometimes children "do mean things" with dolls, such as "putting a baby in the oven." Such behavior allows children to release tension, rather than keeping it bottled up.

Children often use dolls to "work through things that may be going on in their family," says Dawn Leach, director of the Austin Community College Children's Lab School. "They may do and say things with dolls they wouldn't dare do or say with their families."

Matching dolls to children's development

Most early childhood educators recommend providing dolls appropriate to children's development. See the guidelines at left.

For infants, dolls are comfort objects in the same category with stuffed animals, says Leach. These dolls need to be soft and cuddly, yet washable and sturdy. If an infant becomes attached to a doll at home as a lovey, teachers

allow the family to bring it from home but don't let other infants use it.

Dolls made of cloth are fine, as long as they can withstand frequent laundering. "If an infant mouths the doll, we rotate it into the laundry basket," says Leach, "so our dolls get washed every day or two."

Dolls also allow infants to practice grasping objects with their hands. Dolls with rattles inside provide auditory stimulation and allow infants to experience cause-and-effect: shaking the doll causes noise.

Realism is important, Leach says. It ought to be clear that the doll represents a person, and not a cartoon or fantasy figure. For infants, this can mean a simple body form made of fabric as well as a plastic baby doll. Children 3 to 5 typically prefer dolls that look like real babies and those with moveable arms and legs that can be posed in different positions.

The best dolls look realistic but "don't really do anything," Leach says. "Dolls that walk and talk take away from what a child can imagine it will do." Battery-operated mechanisms have other disadvantages: batteries must be replaced and mechanisms tend to break or wear out with heavy use. Even drink-and-wet dolls pose a problem: mold and mildew can grow inside.

Realism includes diversity. Beginning at infancy, dolls ideally represent various ethnic groups and cultures. Even in classrooms in which all children are from the same ethnic or racial group, dolls need to represent the diversity of the community.

It's not enough for dolls to have different skin colors, says Leach.

They need different kinds of hair and facial features. Dolls for preschoolers can introduce diverse abilities as well, through the use of props such as a doll wheelchair, hearing aid, and eyeglasses.

Both Leach and Speranza advocate anatomically correct dolls, beginning at infancy. These dolls "normalize" boy-girl differences, something children are already observing and discussing when they use the toilet, says Speranza. In some communities, however, parents may find these dolls objectionable, particularly if a school or center has never had them before. "It might be wise to check with parents first," says Linda Ard, who teaches at Del Mar College in Corpus Christi.

Attractiveness also matters, says Speranza. Children tend to pass over dolls with matted hair, a missing eye, or a body with ink scribbling. As a result, children need to be taught to care for dolls, and teachers need to clean and store them properly.

Baby dolls versus Barbies

Many experienced teachers look with disfavor on fashion or teen dolls in the classroom. From a practical standpoint, fashion dolls have many tiny parts that can be lost. Children—and teachers—get frustrated looking for tiny shoes or hats.

From the standpoint of social-emotional development, fashion dolls promote a stereotype of a beautiful woman as tall, skinny (some would say anorexic), busty, and blonde. They "place an emphasis on fashionable clothes and other possessions; and they suggest teen-age or adult role-play activities rather than activities that

are appropriate for young children" (Bronson 1995). These dolls "create interest in teen appearance, music and risk-taking behaviors that children imitate but don't understand" (TRUCE).

But some educators say teen dolls can have a place, depending upon children's needs and the teacher's values and beliefs. "For example, if you believe that fashion dolls have impossible figures that no person could live up to, and if you believe that children already are exposed to models that the vast majority of people could never look like, then those beliefs may influence you to keep teen fashion dolls out of the child care environment. If you value the creative process that children go through in pretend play and you want them to be able to use dolls to act out what they may be seeing in part of their world of teenage siblings, friends and relatives, then you may want to allow fashion dolls" (Thompson).

Peg dolls and miniatures

Beginning about 18 months, children can play with peg dolls (such as the Duplo® people) that are about 2 1/2 inches high and made of wood or plastic. Toddlers will put these peg dolls into toy vehicles. Safety note: Make sure the dolls are big enough so that toddlers won't swallow them.

As children grow, they will use small people figures in playing with blocks and toy buildings. By kindergarten, children will engage in elaborate fantasy play with miniature people families in doll houses and storybook settings.



Similar arguments apply to toy soldiers like G.I. Joe®. Many educators believe such “dolls” promote aggressive play and the use of violence in problem solving. However, if children are from police or military families, a teacher may want to allow toy soldiers so children can explore these roles and their feelings within the context of units on safety and peacekeeping.

Professor Singer argues that toy soldiers have been popular for generations, and many boys who played with them grew up to be well-known pacifists. “I am much more concerned about the millions of children who have no toys, no parents who tell stories or read to them, and no sense of history but who do have available real guns and who are stimulated to imitation by older peers and by the heavy doses of daily exposure to realistic violence on television” (1994). He suggests that pretend play with toy soldiers could allow

boys to release negative emotions and learn the consequences of their actions.

Supporting children’s dramatic play

Children need little, if any, encouragement to play with dolls. “We may say something like, ‘This baby looks really hungry,’ and then we let them go,” says Speranza. Children take it from there. Dolls are an open-ended learning material; they can be played with again and again in many different ways.

Actually, experienced teachers advise staying out of children’s pretend play, except for basic supervision. If children invite the teacher to “come to our tea party,” the teacher can participate in their play but without becoming the focus of attention. Teachers can excuse themselves at an appropriate opportunity: “Oh, I need to go to the doctor now. Thank you.”

Careful observation of doll play can provide insight into what children are thinking and feeling. Experienced teachers tolerate behavior in pretend play that would not be allowed in real life, like hitting a doll, as a way for children to work through strong feelings, but only up to a point. “If the play degenerates, it’s time to intervene,” says Speranza.

When intervening, teachers need to focus on the feeling. Not: “Moms don’t treat babies that way,” but: “How do you feel when hitting the baby? How does the baby feel?”

At the same time, children need to understand that dolls, like other toys and learning materials, must be used as intended. “We respect people and things” is a

common rule. In preparing the dramatic play center, teachers put dolls in their beds or on a shelf, rather than dumping them in a box. Careful handling and display is “a nonverbal way of suggesting use,” says Speranza. Before leaving the center, children put the dolls back where they found them.

It’s not necessary to dress dolls after play (or for storage), except perhaps for a diaper, because children change the clothes during play anyway. To protect hair during storage, Speranza advises a tight-fitting doll cap.

The number of dolls put out for children to play with depends on many things, including the children’s age and space. For toddlers, who cannot share toys, teachers put out at least two of the same doll. For preschoolers, in a dramatic play center that can hold five children, two or three dolls may be enough. If children are playing “doctor’s office,” five or six dolls may be necessary.

Boys play with baby and child-like dolls until about age 4 or 5 when they may switch to “boy dolls” like G.I. Joe. If a boy gets teased about playing with baby dolls, experienced teachers step in: “We read the book, *William’s Doll*, with children to remove the stigma,” says Speranza. Some educators insist that doll play is OK for boys because it teaches the nurturing attitude they will need as fathers.

Teachers can encourage boys to engage in more doll play by changing the housekeeping props in the dramatic play center. If the center is a doctor’s office, dolls become the patients, for example. If the center is an airplane, dolls become child passengers.

Puppets

“Puppets are dolls that you stick your hand in and talk,” says Dawn Leach, Austin Community College. Teachers can use puppets to tell stories to toddlers, but children themselves don’t play with puppets until about age 4. Children usually don’t have the hand-and-finger dexterity to operate puppets with limbs until age 5 or 6.

Preschool children can use hand, finger, and arm-and-hand puppets. They prefer puppets made of soft materials and clearly marked facial features as well as basic clothing and simple puppet theaters (Bronson 1995).

Dolls in other learning centers

While essential to the dramatic play center, dolls can support learning in other centers.

- **Water table.** Children enjoy “giving baby a bath.” In addition to vinyl baby dolls, children will need materials such as mild soap and shampoo, towels, and lotion.
- **Blocks.** Small people figures are common in block centers, but ordinary dolls can enhance the fantasy of play. A doll can become a giant child among Lilliputians, or ride as a passenger in a child-sized block train.
- **Science/discovery.** Dolls offer a model for teaching about body parts. “When you say, ‘Point to the eye,’ children can poke the doll’s eye instead of another child’s,” says Leach.
- **Manipulatives.** A doll and an assortment of clothing with snaps, hook-and-loop fasteners, and buttons can help children practice fine-motor skills.
- **Library/language.** Children can “read” to dolls and repeat flannel board stories to them.

Dolls as toilet training aids

Chris Owens, who teaches 3- to 5-year-olds at the Austin Community College Children’s Lab School, uses dolls in toilet learning. Dolls become models for how to sit or stand and how to wipe. For example, “We demonstrate to girls how to wipe from front to back.”

The training includes such things as how many sheets of toilet paper to use, how to lift the lid (boys), and how to wash hands afterward.

- **Outdoors.** Children play with dolls in the sand, stroll with them in carriages, or pull them in wagons. Some teachers designate older, worn dolls as “outside only.”

Choosing dolls for the classroom

In choosing dolls, as with any toys or learning materials, teachers need to consider the child’s development as well as how the doll will be used:

- Is the doll safe? For infants and toddlers, make sure dolls have no small objects (button eyes, pacifiers) that pose a choking hazard. Eliminate cords that can get wrapped around a child’s neck.
 - If you buy from a source other than a reputable educational supplier, make sure the doll has no protruding wires or sharp edges that can pinch or cut fingers. Question whether the body material, stuffing, and paint are non-toxic.
- Will the doll withstand heavy laundering? Cloth dolls for infants need to be machine washed and dried every day or two, especially after an infant puts a doll in her mouth. Vinyl dolls will undergo frequent baths by children.
- Will the doll withstand heavy use? Infants and toddlers will drag dolls around, drop them, and sometimes bang them. Look for flexible materials and sturdy construction.
- Is the doll suited to the children’s developmental level? Age ranges stated on the label can be misleading. Be realistic about the children’s skills and interests.

- How much does the doll require children to use their imagination? Educators criticize battery-operated and computerized dolls as little machines that distract children from real play. By contrast, simple dolls let children take the lead and use their own imaginations.
- Does the doll help reflect diversity? Aim for a true reflection of culture, ethnicity, gender, and ability. Avoid tokenism. One black or one Hispanic doll is not enough in an ethnically diverse community.
- How much does the doll cost? Dolls in educational supply catalogs range in price from \$10 to \$50. In tight budget times, “put your money in a quality doll, not the accessories,” says Leach. “You can use boxes for cradles and empty food cartons for play food.”

Buying tips

- See and touch the doll for yourself, if possible, says Ard. Instead of relying on pictures in catalogs or on the Internet, visit doll vendors at conferences. Or visit other centers that have the dolls you’re considering.
- Be cautious about heavy advertising. It could mean the doll is this year’s fad and tomorrow’s junk.
- Check garage sales and thrift shops for doll and baby clothes. Parents may also be willing to donate baby clothes they no longer need.
- Remember that children will get into doll beds and other accessories. Look for large size and sturdiness.
- Ask parents if they or grandparents are willing to make doll clothes, doll houses, and play furniture for you.

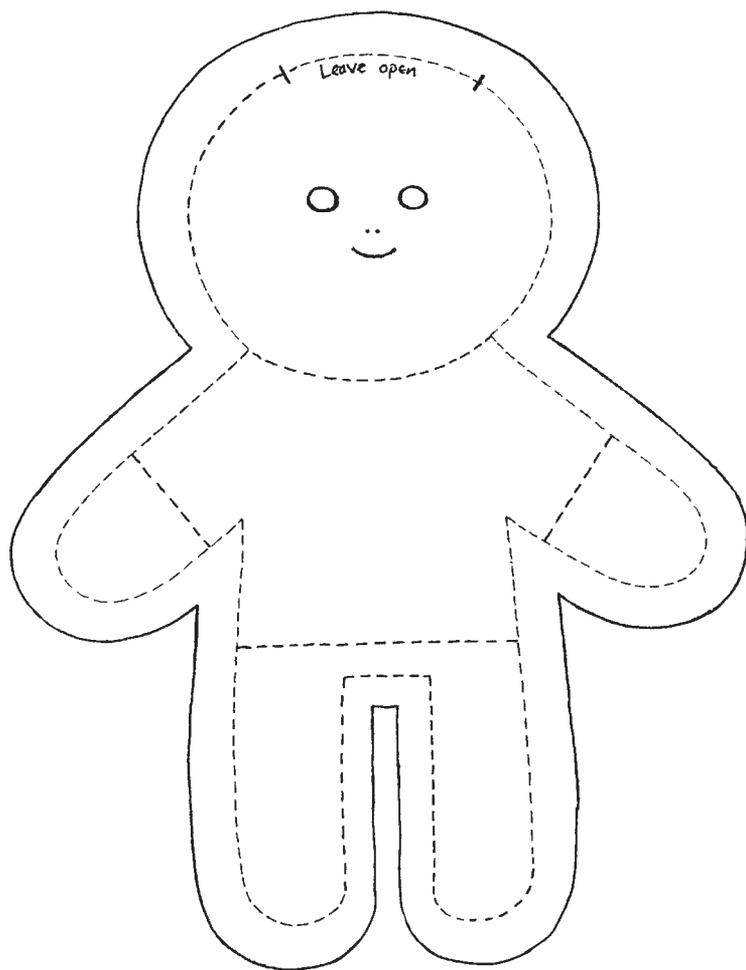
Make a cloth doll

Cloth dolls make ideal grasping and comfort toys for infants and toddlers. They can be made easily from small pieces of fabric and synthetic stuffing. A parent or volunteer can make several for you overnight or during a weekend.

Infants and toddlers put everything into their mouths, so make one for each child in your care and wash the dolls after use. Use a simple, one-piece body (see pattern). For safety, sew the doll's clothing to the body (no detachable parts). Embroider features on the doll's face, making the eyes large and brightly colored (no buttons).

Here's what you need:

- tissue paper
- pencil
- pins
- scissors
- $\frac{1}{3}$ yard colorfast, non-shrink fabric in a desired skin color (brown, beige, black)
- scraps of brightly colored or patterned fabric for shirt
- synthetic, washable stuffing
- embroidery thread for facial features
- sewing machine and matching thread



1. Use a photocopier to enlarge the pattern so it's 8 to 10 inches long. Place tissue paper over the doll pattern and trace around the entire body. Place another piece of tissue paper over the pattern and trace only around the shirt.
2. Fold the body fabric so you can cut two pieces at once. Lay the body pattern on top, pin, and cut. Remove the pattern.
3. Do the same with the shirt fabric and pattern.
4. Place one piece of the shirt, right side up, on the body front, and the other piece on the body back. Baste in place. Turn under and machine stitch along the neckline, sleeve ends, and bottom edge.
5. Embroider eyes, nose, and mouth on the face.
6. Keeping right sides together, pin the body front to the body back. Machine stitch about $\frac{1}{2}$ inch from the edge, leaving the seam open about 1 inch at the head for stuffing.
7. Trim the seam to $\frac{1}{4}$ inch. Clip at the neck, under the arms, and between the legs. Turn the body right side out.
8. Stuff the doll, using a pencil to push the stuffing into the arms and legs.
9. At the opening, turn in the seam allowance and stitch closed, either by hand or machine.

Variations: Before stitching the body, embroider several straight lines of stitching, close together, on the head for hair and on the feet for shoes. Or stitch fabric to the back of the doll's head for a cap and to the doll's feet for shoes.



Resources: A sampling

Childcraft

Early Childhood Direct
PO Box 3239
Lancaster, PA 17604
1-800-631-5652
www.childcraft.com

The 2004 infant-to-kindergarten catalog offers two baby dolls with either white or black skin: an 11-inch doll in a dress and a 20-inch vinyl doll in shirt and diapers. Child dolls are available in several ethnicities. The 16-inch has realistic hair, facial features, and play clothes. In the 13-inch version, only the girls have rooted hair (the boys' is molded), and the clothing reflects international styles. Cloth dolls (14-inch) can help children learn dressing skills (button, snap, zip, buckle, lace, and tie); these dolls come in various skin and hair color.

Constructive Playthings®

13201 Arrington Rd.
Grandview, MO 64030-2886
1-800-448-4115
www.cptoys.com

The 2003-2004 catalog offers a 13-inch, washable cloth doll for toddlers and an 18-inch rag doll with yarn hair and denim or khaki clothing for preschoolers. A wheelchair is available for the rag doll. Of baby dolls, a 12-inch, batheable type comes dressed in panties with a blanket. Two other baby dolls (16-inch and 17-inch) are anatomically correct newborns clad in diapers. The 17-inch doll comes with a blanket. The catalog features two child dolls: 13-inch and 16-inch. All doll types are available in several ethnicities.

Environments, Inc.
PO Box 1348
Beaufort, SC 29901-1348
1-800-342-4453
www.environments.com

The 2004 catalog offers a 9¹/₂-inch, machine-washable cloth doll for toddlers and a 20-inch printed fabric doll (Earthchild®) that represents global diversity. Baby dolls include a 17-inch realistic vinyl doll that is anatomically correct, and a 14-inch realistic vinyl doll, both of which come with a diaper. All doll types are available in several ethnicities.

Kaplan

PO Box 609
1310 Lewisville-Clemmons Road
Lewisville, NC 27023-0609
1-800-334-2014
www.kaplanco.com

The 2004 catalog offers a realistic baby doll in 10- and 14-inch sizes and four ethnicities. Child-like dolls include 13-inch, 16-inch, and 19-inch globally diverse versions, each of which is available in 10 different hair styles. Adaptive equipment (walker, leg braces, wheelchair, and cane with seeing-eye dog) is available that fits the 16-inch doll. The catalog also features a 14-inch cloth doll (varied ethnicities) designed for teaching dressing skills (buckle, button, zip, snap, lace and hook-and-loop tape).

Lakeshore Learning Materials.
2695 E. Dominguez St.
Carson, CA 90810
1-800-778-4456
www.lakeshorelearning.com

The 2004 catalog offers an 11-inch, machine-washable cloth doll for toddlers, as well as an 18-inch rag doll with yarn hair and child-like clothing. Plastic baby dolls include 10- and 18-inch types in

simple outfits as well as 10- and 14-inch realistic newborns clad only in diapers. A child-like doll, 16 inches tall, is made of vinyl with nylon hair and varied child-like clothing. All doll types are available in several ethnicities. Adaptive equipment (wheelchair, leg braces, walker, eyeglasses, hearing aid, protective helmet, cane and seeing-eye dog) is available for the 16-inch doll.

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