

If dolls could talk, what might they say?

After all the children have gone for the day, Ms. Higgins scans the room. Her eyes fall upon the dramatic play center, and a particular doll—the one called Dolly—catches her attention.

This plastic baby doll has been in her early childhood program for years. Ms. Higgins wonders, if dolls could talk, what might Dolly say? What might she ask Dolly? Her eyes soften as she imagines a conversation.



Dolly: *Yeah, I've been here for years. I've been squeezed, dropped, bathed, kissed, and fought over by hundreds of children.*

But it's OK. I know it's all about make-believe. I see the beginnings of that when children are about 18 months old. By 24 months, they're talking to me, feeding me, and tucking me in bed. Today Lindsey told me, "Let's change your diaper."

And before long I'll see them act out roles for themselves, like mommy and daddy. Some will play more than one role at a time. I'm thinking of Davy. He not only plays daddy but sometimes speaks for baby: "Time for bed." "No, I'm not sleepy."

Anyway, children don't need much encouragement to play with me.

Ms. Higgins: *That's true. If there's a lull, I can say something like, "This baby looks really hungry," and the children take it from there. Dolls are an open-ended learning material; they can be played with again and again in many different ways.*

Today the 4-year-olds played school. They were the teachers and they pretended to read Spanish books to their dolls. I think this play has really improved their bilingual skills.

Pretending they are the teachers—or mom and dad, or whatever—is a way for children to bring the world into manageable size. Pretend play allows children to re-do

their own experiences where they are the big people and make the rules.

Dolly: *Experience—that's what happens to them here at school, at home, and in other places they go with their families.*

Ms. Higgins: *Realism is important. It must be clear that the doll represents a person, and not a cartoon or fantasy figure. For infants, this can mean a plastic baby doll like you or even a simple body form of cloth. Preschoolers 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. Dolls that walk and talk take away from what a child can imagine it will do. Battery-operated parts have other disadvantages: batteries must be replaced, and the mechanisms tend to break or wear out with heavy use. Even drink-and-wet dolls pose a problem: mold and mildew can grow inside.

Dolly: *Realism means diversity, too. I'm Hispanic,*



PHOTO BY SUSAN GAETZ

and I have doll friends here that are black, white, Asian, and multiracial.

Ms. Higgins: Right. Even in classrooms where all the children are of the same ethnic or racial group, dolls need to represent the diversity of the community.

And it's not enough for dolls to be different skin colors. They need different kinds of hair and facial features. Dolls for preschoolers can have diverse abilities as well, through the use of props such as a doll wheelchair, hearing aids, and eyeglasses. Our 4-year-old room has a Down syndrome doll, not so much for a child with that disability, but for everybody else.

WE RESPECT PEOPLE AND THINGS.

Here we also have anatomically correct dolls. We believe these dolls normalize boy-girl differences, something children are already observing and discussing when they use the toilet.

Dolly: How do parents react to that?

Ms. Higgins: Parents can be a little squeamish, but they gradually came around.

Dolly: I've never seen fashion dolls here. Why is that?

Ms. Higgins: From a practical standpoint, fashion dolls have many tiny parts that can be lost. Children—and teachers—get frustrated looking for a tiny shoe or hat.

From the standpoint of social-emotional development, I think fashion dolls promote a stereotype of a woman as tall, skinny (some would say anorexic), busty, and blonde. They emphasize fashionable clothes and possessions; and they suggest teen-age or adult role-play activities rather than activities that are appropriate for young children. These dolls can create undue interest in appearance and behaviors that children imitate but don't understand.

But some teachers say teen dolls can have a place, depending upon the children. For example, if you believe that fashion dolls have impossible figures that can diminish children's perceptions of themselves and their families, then you might prohibit them. On the other hand, if you want children to be able to use dolls to act out what they may be seeing in teenage siblings, friends, and relatives, then you may want to allow a few fashion dolls.

Dolly: Makes sense to me.

Ms. Higgins: What kind of doll play do you like best?

Dolly: That's hard to say. I like going outdoors, where children take me for a stroll in the sunshine. Or we play in the sandbox and then I get a bath before coming back inside. Sometimes it depends on the teacher.

Ms. Higgins: Our teachers generally stay out of children's pretend play, except for basic supervision. If a child invites a teacher to "come to our picnic," the teacher can participate in their play but without becoming the focus of attention. Teachers can excuse themselves at an appropriate time: "Oh, I need to go to the doctor now. Thank you."

Dolly: Another thing I like is nap time. I'm a lovey for some children. We snuggle on the cot, listen to the teacher sing a lullaby, and before I know it, we're both asleep.

Ms. Higgins: If an infant or toddler brings a doll from home as a lovey, we allow the family to bring it but we don't let other infants use it.

Dolly: I also come in handy during toilet training. OK, this is a little embarrassing, but it can be useful, especially for male teachers. A teacher may use me as a model for how to sit or stand and how to wipe. Girls get a demonstration of how to wipe from front to back. And children also learn such things as how many sheets of toilet paper to use, how to lift the lid (boys), and how to wash their hands afterward.

Ms. Higgins: Speaking of boys and girls, as they approach the primary grades, it's mostly the girls that play with baby dolls, not the boys. How does that make you feel?

Dolly: It makes me sad. Just think what they're missing—building small-muscle skills from dressing and feeding dolls, practicing language by talking to dolls and other children, and learning social skills like sharing, helping, and problem solving. Not to mention missing all the fun.

Ms. Higgins: Yes, it makes me sad too. We see that boys often switch from dolls to action figures like Batman and G.I. Joe. I think playing with most action figures can promote aggression and violence. On the other hand, if children are from police or military families, I allow toy soldiers so children can explore these roles and their feelings in our safe environment.

Of course, toy soldiers have been popular for generations, and many boys who played with them grew up to be well-known pacifists. I like to quote a Yale professor, Jerome Singer, who has written that he is "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." He has a point.

Dolly: What about Woody, the hero in the Toy Story movies?

Ms. Higgins: He's a different kind of action figure--a lovable cowboy. He's the favorite toy of his owner, Andy, and he's the leader and brains of all Andy's other toys. He spends all his time helping everyone. Most important, he wears an empty holster--no gun.

Dolly: I've noticed that if a boy in your class gets teased about playing with baby dolls, you step in and read the book, William's Doll.

Ms. Higgins: Yes, I read it with all the children to remove the stigma of a man doing the stereotypical woman's work. And we talk about it. I believe doll play as a child can influence boys to develop the nurturing attitude they will need as fathers. After all, the world has changed. More fathers today are becoming stay-at-home dads.

I also change the props in the dramatic play area from time to time to appeal to both boys and girls. The center can be a doctor's office with dolls as patients, for example, or a hair salon with dolls as customers.

Dolly: I like it when the center is set up as an airplane, and I get to be a passenger. Zoom! Zoom!

Ms. Higgins: Is there anything you don't like about children playing with you?

Dolly: Well, I guess that would be when children hit me--or put me in the oven. Yeah, that has really happened to me. It was dark and scary. But, you know, I think that can be therapeutic. That kind of behavior allows children to work through their feelings and resolve things that may be going on in their families. Sometimes they do and say things with dolls they wouldn't dare do or say with their families. It gives some insight into what children are thinking and feeling.

Ms. Higgins: As teachers, we can tolerate such behavior as a way for children to work through strong feelings, but only up to a point. If the play gets worse, we intervene. And when intervening, we focus on the feeling: "How do you feel when hitting the baby? How does the baby feel?"

Oh my, it's getting late. I need to go.

Dolly: One more thing. I've heard parents ask you about all sorts of dolls, and you always say that simple and realistic dolls--like me--are best. I love that.



Matching dolls to children's development

Most early childhood educators recommend providing dolls appropriate to children's development. See the guidelines below for suggestions on doll types, sizes, clothing, and accessories.

Infants

- Soft, cuddly dolls with simple, one-piece bodies (rag dolls), painted or molded hair, and no detachable parts. Best are dolls that are 8 to 13-inches long.
- May have rattle inside for auditory stimulation.
- Lightweight, washable dolls that can be grasped from any angle, with bright colors and sharp contrasts--with emphasis on face and especially eyes.
- Skin colors that represent varied ethnicities.

Young toddlers (1-year-olds)

- Cloth and vinyl baby dolls, soft and cuddly, no moving eyes.
- Skin colors and facial features that represent varied ethnicities.
- Eight to 13-inches long, small enough to hold and carry around with one hand.
- Simple clothes that are either painted on or detachable or sewed or painted on. Baby dolls have diapers with hook-and-loop or adhesive tape (no pins).
- A doll cradle (sturdy enough for a child to get into) and blankets are appropriate accessories.

Older toddlers (2-year-olds)

- Washable baby dolls. Skin color and facial features that represent varied ethnicities and cultures.
- Twelve to 15-inches long, easy to hold, and fits comfortably in a child's arms.
- Simple clothes (nightgowns, diapers, shirts) with easy closings (hook-and-loop, snaps).
- Doll cradle, blankets, bottles, and other feeding items.

Preschool (3-to-5 year olds)

- Washable, realistic baby dolls with distinct arms and legs. Dolls that look like children to encourage role play. Dolls are generic rather representing a specific fictional character.
- Skin colors, hair, and facial features that represent the diversity of the community.
- Twelve to 15-inches long; miniatures are also

appropriate.

- Assorted clothes (shirts, pants, dresses) with easy closings, including items that reflect cultural identities.
- Cradle, blankets, bottles and other feeding items, carriage or shopping cart, child-size rocking chair.
- Props that represent disabilities such as wheelchair, hearing aids, and eyeglasses.

Primary school (6-to-8 year olds)

- Baby dolls to bathe and diaper. Child dolls that encourage playing school and fantasy stories.
- Skin colors, hair, and facial features that represent community diversity.
- All sizes, from miniatures to 18- to 21-inch dolls
- Clothes for baby dolls (booties, bonnets, bibs) and child dolls (shoes, socks, dresses, nightgowns, pants, shirts, jackets), including items that reflect cultural identities.
- Props build on those for preschoolers with additional items such as diaper bag, bed linens, wipes that support dramatic play.

Adapted from *The Right Stuff for Children Birth to 8*,

by Martha B. Bronson

Other doll forms

At about 18 months, toddlers begin to play with peg dolls, such as the Lego Duplo® people. These blocks are bigger than the regular Lego bricks and are intended for ages 18 months to 6 years. Toddlers may put these peg dolls into toy vehicles, buildings, or buckets for favorite gather-and-dump games. 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.

Puppets are another category of doll. Teachers may use puppets to tell stories to children, but children themselves don't generally play with puppets until about age 3, starting with simple sock puppets. Preschool children can use whole hand, finger, and arm-and-hand puppets, and prefer puppets made of soft materials with clearly marked facial features as well as basic clothing. Simple puppet theaters add variety to this creative play (Bronson 1995). Not until the age of 5 or 6 do children have the

hand-and-finger dexterity to operate puppets with limbs or marionettes moved by cords.

Care of dolls

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

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. Before leaving the center, children are expected to 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, dolls can wear a tight-fitting doll cap.

The number of dolls put out for children to play with depends on many things, including the children's ages and space in the room. 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.



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Dolls in other learning centers

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

Water table. Children enjoy giving baby a bath. In addition to vinyl baby dolls, children will need materials such as mild soap, shampoo, and towels.

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 and 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 their own or another child’s.

Manipulatives. A doll and an assortment of clothing with snaps, hook-and-loop fasteners, and buttons can help children practice fine-motor skills.

Library and language. Children can share books with dolls and repeat flannel board stories to them.

Outdoors. Children play with dolls in the sand, stroll with them in carriages, or pull them in wagons.

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 your 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 imagination.

SEE AND TOUCH THE DOLL FOR YOURSELF.

- 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 \$25 to \$150. In tight budget times, money is better spent on a quality doll, not the accessories. You can use boxes for cradles and empty food cartons for play food.

Buying tips

- See and touch the doll for yourself, if possible. Instead of relying on pictures in catalogs or on the Internet, visit doll vendors at conferences. Or visit



PHOTO BY SUSAN GAETZ

- 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.

Resources: A sampling

Constructive Playthings[®], www.constructiveplaythings.com, 1-800-448-4115

Community Playthings, www.communityplaythings.com, 1-800-777-4244

Discount School Supply, www.discount-school-supply.com, 1-800-627-2829

Kaplan Early Learning Company, Kaplanco.com, 1-800-334-2014

Lakeshore Learning Materials, www.lakeshore-learning.com, 1-800-778-4456

Nasco, www.eNASCO.com, 1-800-558-9595

Make a cloth doll

Cloth dolls make ideal grasping and comfort toys for infants and toddlers. At this age, children put everything into their mouths, so make one for each child in your care and wash the dolls after use.

A parent or volunteer can make several for you overnight or during a weekend, using the instructions below or a purchased pattern (\$3.49) such as the one available from Jo-Ann Fabrics at www.joann.com/12-inch-muslin-doll-natural/10232866.html.

Here's what you need:

- doll, 12 to 13 inches long, in your collection
- tissue paper
- pencil
- pins
- scissors
- ½ yard colorfast, non-shrink fabric in a desired skin color (brown, beige, black)
- scraps of brightly colored or patterned fabric for pajama
- synthetic, washable stuffing
- embroidery thread for facial features

- sewing machine and matching thread

1. Place tissue paper under the doll. Trace around the doll's entire body. Mark a line about ½ inch wide around the body for the seam allowance. Cut out the tracing to use as a pattern.
2. Fold the fabric in half so you can cut two pieces at once. Lay the body pattern on top, pin, and cut. Remove the pattern.
3. Cut off the head, hands, and feet of the pattern to use as a pattern for a one-piece pajama. Fold the patterned fabric in half and place this pattern on top. Pin and cut, and remove the pattern.
4. Place one piece of the pajama, right side up, on the body front, and the other piece on the body back. Baste in place. Turn under ½ inch and machine stitch along the pajama neckline, sleeve ends, and leg ends.
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 ½ inch from the edges, leaving the seam open about 1 inch at the head for stuffing.
7. Trim the seam to ¼ 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.

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