

Barbie the Ideal Role Model In Gender Development.

We must first note that gender is not the same as sex. When we state the word sex we mean in biological terms a person's maleness or femaleness. In stating the term gender, the general definition is the role or identity, in which we decide to adhere to. Gender role includes the attitudes or behaviours that are considered appropriate for males and female in a particular culture.

The way in which psychologist's attempt to explain how we develop a particular gender depends upon who is defining it. Freud believed that gender development could be attributed to conflict between the child's desires and an actual event. Whereas, cognitive psychologist, explain gender development as a concept that children's understanding of the world depends upon their ability to understand information, to be able to make logical inferences, and to draw conclusions, these skills develop throughout childhood. One of the main psychologist of the cognitive developmental theory is Piaget, his theories, although critically acclaimed to be limited, are still viewed, as being quite important today.

There are many different theories concerned with, explaining gender development however, the one that will be examined in this essay is the Social Learning Theory. According to social learning theory, behaviour is acquired in two ways; through reinforcement and modelling. The process of reinforcement is based upon the principle that behaviour is modified by its consequences. Behaviour that has favourable consequences (reinforcement) is more likely to be repeated. Whereas, behaviour that is not rewarded or is punished is less likely to be performed again. Though reinforcement has a powerful influence on shaping behaviour, social learning also occurs through the observation and imitation of others in the absence of reinforcement. This process is known as modelling or observational learning. (Gender Development pg76)

Children acquire a considerable amount of knowledge about the world through play. Consider this notion, and the notion of the type of toys that we believe our children like to play with. There is little doubt about, why women are perceived as they are in today's society.

Before a child can read or write, they hear songs and stories that highlight the roles that are favoured by the culture. In these songs and stories girls learn traditional values as favoured by our mothers, while boys are portrayed in positive progressive roles. These rhymes are handed down from generation to generation with little thought to the images that we are presenting to the child.

Little girls learn early that females are inadequate and never do anything right, at least, not in Little Bo Peep who loses her sheep, the Queen of hearts who has her tarts stolen and Old Mother Hubbard can't feed her dog. So these poorly functioning females become frustrated, ill tempered, and antisocial. Males in nursery rhymes do not have these emotional problems, they are positive in their approach. Like Little Bo Peep, Little Boy Blue also loses his sheep, because he falls asleep but he retrieves them by blowing his horn. In addition to devouring pie and leading Jill up the hill, Jack builds a house and jumps over the candlestick. Even Simple Simon, the village idiot can get to the fair alone. (Ann Ruth Turkel pg174)

The conspiracy continues: One of the best selling girls toys is a product named Barbie, she is a doll that has every accessory known to man, she lives in a pink mansion and drives a jeep. In addition, she is tall with legs up to her armpits, a large size pair of pert boobs. A wash board stomach and virtually no hips, her hair is blonde, long and flowing. With all these attributes, it is hard to comprehend why she has only one boyfriend, that is Ken, who again is tall rich good looking, the list goes on.

As a short black female with more poundage than she needs, and more split hairs than she has hair. Who lives with her mum and drives an old but none the less a sports car, one can understand why it was hard for me and several other women to identify with Barbie.

The fact that Barbie is a doll relevant to her power, for dolls are not just play things. They are anthropomorphic sculptures that have often served as ritual objects. Before Barbie, dolls were baby like, to be fed and molly coddled, designed to teach girls about mothering and nurturing their babies, in order to prepare them for the real world. (Albert, M, Magro pg365)

Mattel the manufacturer of the toy named Barbie responded to the public outcry and modified her in 1992 to Teen Talk Barbie. This icon could now talk, all she had to say though was 'Lets go to then prom' 'I love to shop' and 'Math class is tough' the Feminists were outraged. Turkel (1998) believed that those girls who avoid maths and science are reacting to the external world, and may be ignoring their innate ability. The Guardian 1997 wrote ' An organisation which campaigns for women scientists and engineers has found that girls have less confidence with practical subjects because they have not played with as many technical toys as boys have. As a result fewer girls take A level maths and science, or go on to study these subjects at university.

With our best selling toy saying 'math class is tough' there is little wonder that girls have this idea reinforced at an early age and believe that they are no better than the little boy who is encouraged to play with toys that they can identify with, a role model like Action Man or Meccano. The role model for girls does not inspire the average little girl to become rocket scientists or an executive of a multi-national company.

In view of the fact that Barbie is the best selling toy for girls, the relevant journals suggest that this is not as much a learning toy, but a toy that they child can explore a fantasy world beyond belief. However, the manufacturers have not taken into consideration that the little girl feels that this person is the person she wants to be. Yes, the little girl learns that there are male and female type behaviour in which to perform. Nevertheless, Barbie does not present a picture true to life. Where are the single mothers? The battered wives? In addition, The fat housewives who husband has taken to drink. No Barbie presents an idealistic picture of how a female's life should be.

Perhaps a bleak view is being painted here and in danger of being too journalistic, but one has to consider the other implications that Barbie presents. Ignore the fact that Barbie is thick, materialistic, ageist, sexist and has lots of unearned money a very good example for the social learning theorists. What needs to be considered is the

body shape of Barbie. The six year girl that plays with Barbie learns all the attributes above but throughout the progression of her life towards adolescence, a reputedly difficult time in a child's life, the child sees that Barbie has the body that she will never acquire without an eating disorder.

Barbie accessories have encouraged girls to be obsessive about weight. In 1965, Mattel tried really hard with babysitter Barbie in which she has three books with her one of, which is called How to Lose, Weight and contains advice like 'don't eat this'. Its no wonder Barbie is perceived as presenting an obsessional body image, converting Barbie's statistics in to real life measurements they would be 39- 21- 33. If they were real she would not be able to menstruate and she would have difficulty giving birth. (Ann Ruth Turkel pg171) As an experienced weight watcher and a grown woman, I know these statistics are an impossible target to reach.

Examining all the journals that have been written about this doll, it is hard to find one that portrays Barbie in a positive light. Nevertheless, not to be too hard on Barbie, after all she is only a doll. Barbie is the first tangible evidence of perfect female sexuality.

We need to consider why do parents give gender-typed toys to their children. Although it might be the case that parents have their toy selection based upon culturally accepted gender stereotyped toys, it is possible that the parents are responding to children toy preferences that are presented in the media.

Official advice suggests that Ken and Barbie fail to develop intellectual or technical ability (Surprise), conditioning little girls into thinking that they are only fit for stereotypical female roles when they grow up. Research from East Anglia University, released in 1997, found that successful women played with traditional male toys during childhood. Apparently, Carol Vorderman's spirograph, which she received at the age of four, was a defining influence upon her choice in career. (The Guardian March 1997)

Concluding this essay, all the theories mentioned at the start of this essay would have a valid viewpoint towards Barbie and all would conclude the same. Barbie presents Freud with some valid arguments about males and females. The cognitive theory in which the child understands the roles in which women chose to take. In addition, the social learning theory in which the child learns their identity from the stimulus received.

An intelligent adult will of course keep a sense of proportion about the toys that they choose, and understand that they are merely an incidental distraction. The real learning aids, the things that children really love playing with are, the garden shears, a boiling kettle, and those cupboard doors that will take their leg off with the viciousness of their spring action. These items do not yet have orange hair and the grinning face of a homicidal maniac, but it is only a matter of time before they become a marketable product. (The Observer 28th December 1997)

Bibliography.

Golombok, S. & Fivush, R. (1994) *Gender Development*. Cambridge University Press: NEW YORK.

Durkin, K. (1998) *Development Social Psychology: From Infancy to Old Age*. Blackwell Publishers: OXFORD.

Turkel, A, R. (1998) *All About Barbie: Distortions of a Transitional Object*. Journal of the Academy of Psychoanalysis. Vol. 28, pp 165-177.

Magro, A. (1997). *Why Barbie is Perceived as Beautiful*. Journal of Perceptual and Motor Skills. Vol. 85, pp 363 -374.

Norton, K.: Olds, T.: Olive, S.: Dank, S. (1998) *Ken and Barbie at Life Size*. Journal Article (Sex Roles). Vol. 34.pp 287-294.

Borger, G. (1997) *Barbie's Newest Values: (the real problem with Barbie is not her unrealistic physical proportions, but her snobby attitude)*. U.S. News and World Report, (Internet Article) Vol. 123, N21, pp 40 (1)

Articles from the Guardian in 1997.

Articles from the Observer in 1997.