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Selling an ideal of lipstick and lace

By Lyn Mikel Brown and Sharon Lamb | December 21, 2005

DOLLS RARELY make it onto dangerous toy lists for the holiday season, unless a 3-year-old bites a head off one and swallows it. But don't be deceived by a pretty face. If massive toy stores are the front lines in America's gender wars, dolls should be on the list of land mines. Go to the war front, and staunchly march down aisles of pink and glitter. It ain't pretty. Well, actually, it *is* pretty, very very pretty. And, increasingly, sexy.

When did pretty and sexy get so confused? Take the Bratz dolls in their new dominatrix leather outfits. Those "stylin' " "kickin' " girlz gave Barbie a run for her money. With a whole lot of "attitude" (but not about anything important, like the war or the erosion of Title IX), these dolls are all about "a passion for fashion." Find them poised in bikinis around a hot tub with the Bratz Boyz and fancy drinks, teaching 6-year-olds how to party hardy! Barbie, once a leader in the sexy pretty doll scene, had to play catch up. All those old-school professional and multicultural Barbies must be away at some women's conference for human rights.

So, boys get robotic, transformable, rule-the-world, awesome action figures. Dolls for girls suggest the kind of action they can look forward to as teenagers: hot-tubbing, clubbing, modeling. We await pole-dance Barbie and the revival of her old friend Margarita Midge.

With the recent outcry against the sexualization of girls and the pornification of just about everything, there's a growing call to let children be children. Too often, though, that means let little girls be stereotypical little girls, involved with baby dolls, princess Barbies, or "Baby Bratz." This can't be the only alternative to sexy pretty because once we're selling stereotypes, it's a short leap from pastel pink to hot pink, innocence to sexy ingénue, princess to diva queen. If the choices are "hot cute shopping teen" dolls or pink, sweet, innocent, baby dolls, it's the age-old problem: good girl or bad; madonna or whore.

One icon in the doll world shows promise: Dora the Explorer. Little girls love this Latina cartoon character, with a real girl's body, her own compass and backpack. She seems to give the right message to that 5-year-old looking for a little action. The world is your oyster, you go girl, explore, use cool equipment, understand that accessorizing means filling your backpack, not your hair, with stuff.

But Dora at the super toy store isn't the girl on television. In a classic bait-and-switch, gone is the map, the no-nonsense bob, the primary colors, the sensible shoes. Instead Dora's in a bathing suit, Dora's selling kitchen sets, and Princess Dora has long flowing hair and a pink castle. Dora's gone the way of Shrek's Fiona the ogre, replaced in licensed fast-food toys and products by Fiona the princess, the whole remarkable message about true beauty dismissed with a wave of a lacy handkerchief.

Dolls teach girls skills, but all too often they're the skills that build two stereotypes: innocent little girls or cute, hot, shopping teens. These are narrow choices that prettify and pacify girlhood, then sexualize and glamorize teen life. And, in case we don't get the connection, it's all called girly.

Of course the whole pretty-to-sexy package teaches little girls how big girls spend money -- on fashion, drinking, and creating their "own style." Doll marketers give girls variations on a familiar theme to create the illusion of choices. "Which girl are you?" They package the feeling

of individuality and personal choice to sell what every other girl buys. It's a brilliant way to satisfy girls' conflicting desires to be special and to fit in. Bratz, Barbie, and, yes, even the wholesome but pricey American Girls tell them how to create their style and rule their world with the right accessories. Bought up by Mattel, American Girl has started promoting Bed and Bath Works lotions and soaps to little girls, selling them a body self-consciousness that goes beyond fashion. Will the Bratz girls start wearing Victoria's Secret lacy undies? Big money has been spent capturing the "tween" market. Are little girls next?

"But that's what little girls want!" we hear the marketers cry. "Didn't girls prefer Mulan Geisha to her soldier's uniform? Don't they like Princess Fiona more than Ogre Fiona?" Don't pre-teens want to look like their teenage big sisters?

Right. Create multimillion-dollar ad campaigns to sell people things they already want? Doesn't work that way, marketers. If you want our confidence, first show some in our little girls. Perhaps you can think up a campaign that creates excitement in exploring the Amazon rather than dressing up in its exotic animal prints.

Lyn Mikel Brown, a professor at Colby College in Maine, and Sharon Lamb, a professor at Saint Michael's College in Vermont, are the authors of "Packaging Girlhood: Rescuing our Daughters from Marketers' Schemes."