

# The Complete Package

## Dolls Aren't Just Eye Candy

by Sierra McCleary-Harris

For decades, Mattel's Barbie dolls have been inspiring girls to achieve their dreams, most recently with the "I Can Be" line. As the doll category continues to thrive—it saw a sales increase of 7 percent in 2011, according to The NPD Group—many other manufacturers are seeking to give consumers an expanded variety of options, releasing numerous dolls with detailed, multiplatform backstories meant to inspire and encourage young girls.

Researchers are continually seeking to decipher just how important doll play is and how it affects a growing child's value system, notions of body image, and self-esteem. According to a 2006 study from Ditmar, Halliwell, and Ive, fantasy and play are crucial to socialization for young children—specifically, to forming values and healthy body images. Tapping into this idea, new offerings across the category offer aesthetically appealing dolls that not only seek to engage children's imaginations, but also to empower them and boost their self-esteem.

Hearts for Hearts Girls, a line of dolls from Playmates Toys, was born when Vice Presi-



Merida—Forest Adventure, from Tollytots



Hearts for Hearts Girls, from Playmates Toys

dent of Marketing Gina Beebe was tasked with creating dolls that are not only inspiring, but that also teach girls about different cultures and how to respect and appreciate others. Lauryce, one of the newest additions to the doll line, is a New Orleans native and Hurricane Katrina survivor who started her own charity, Living in Louisiana (LIL) Hearts, to raise money for her local animal shelter and displaced Haitian children, according to the doll's back-story. Girls are able to connect with Lauryce and the other HFHG dolls through their online pages and diary entries.

The website also offers girls the chance to share stories about real-life HFHGs. "We have real stories about inspiring girls who have overcome challenges to help change other people's lives within their own communities and around the world," Beebe says.



La Dee Da World Tour Collection, from Spin Master

This ongoing emotional engagement can help to reinforce value systems and further empower girls.

Known for their Disney princess dolls, Tollytots and its new Merida offerings provide consumers with trusted Disney products with a new slant. Based on the main character from *Brave*, the Disney/Pixar production that released this summer, Merida is a fearless, Scottish princess who follows her own dreams. Unlike some other Disney princesses, Merida remains independent and unmarried at the end of the film.

As a mother and the public relations director for Tollytots, Carolyn Sutton is hyper-aware of the importance of encouraging imaginative play and offering dolls that inspire girls to be confident and creative. “The great thing about *Brave* is Merida was truly the first heroine in a leading role for a Pixar movie. Merida really chooses her own fate. She goes for what she believes, despite what her mom feels she should do. It’s a great story about family relationships, wishes, and magic,” Sutton says.

Sutton says that Tollytots places significant importance on imaginative play and, specific to the princess line, imagination with a princess friendship. It is this friendship that Sutton believes teaches girls the importance of strong friendships, confidence, and

trust, each of which can be reinforced by parents throughout the child’s life.

With the La Dee Da line from Spin Master, two of the most popular categories among girls are combined: fashion dolls and activities. Dee forges her own path as a teen fashion designer who runs La Dee Da with her three BFFs. Dee’s entrepreneurial-business attitude is a rarity among dolls. With Dee, Spin Master aims to not only encourage girls to create and design, but also to look at the world differently, according to Georgia Lopez, marketing director of girls’ brands for Spin Master.

The La Dee Da dolls’ oversized heads, big eyes, and tiny lips and noses all contribute to a high-fashion, exaggerated look. At first glance, these dolls and their slim proportions may cause concern for some. Lopez, who stresses that their over-the-top outfits, makeup, hairstyles, and bodies are not grounded in reality, isn’t worried. “We think the emphasis on creativity, DIY, and self-expression will inspire real girls and therefore appeal to parents,” she says. While other brands may focus on a particular aspect of play, one of the most important aspects of the La Dee Da brand, according to Lopez, is for girls to express themselves in a healthy, age-appropriate way that is great for self-esteem.

The trend toward inspiring, self-empowering dolls is refreshing, and the options available to consumers are growing. Whether girls are playing with the entrepreneurial La Dee Da dolls, or feeding hungry children in the Amazon through the purchase of a HFHG doll, they will be learning a variety of values, from being strong and independent to helping those less fortunate. While Barbie is sure to continue to inspire generations of girls, she may have to make some room in her caravan for a new troupe of role models. ■

#### At a Glance

—43 percent of U.S. households purchased at least one doll in 2011.

—For the 12 months ending June 2012, U.S. doll sales increased by 3 percent, garnering \$2.7 billion.

Source: The NPD Group