

# Friend or foe: Barbie turns 50

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Barbie is looking pretty good at 50.

She has no wrinkles. She hasn't put on a single pound. Her curvaceous figure, pouty red lips and vivacious blond hair remain just as striking as when she first stepped out on the world stage in a black-and-white-striped swimsuit during the Eisenhower administration.

Baltimore is celebrating the iconic doll's big anniversary with an exhibition at Geppi's Entertainment Museum, near Oriole Park at Camden Yards. More than 60 Barbie dolls, some clad in ball gowns with sequins, one in a Star Trek outfit, some in ballerina tutus and another in black fishnet stockings, stare back at visitors from behind large glass cases in a display titled "50 Fashionable Years."

Yet, even as millions of girls in Charm City and around the world continue to delight in Barbie, not everyone is wishing her a long life.

Concerned that the famous blonde is a bad role model who promotes a materialistic lifestyle and unnatural body image, many think parents should box Barbie and put her back on the shelf. Others worry that Barbie's skimpy outfits feed a sex-crazed culture and encourage girls to dress immodestly.

Whether her influence has been positive, negative or both, one thing is clear: even as sales dropped 21 percent in the last quarter of 2008, the queen of American plastic fashion models is here to stay.

## **'It's very unrealistic'**

A major complaint about Barbie is her unnatural, eye-popping measurements, which would be 38-18-33 if she were a real woman.

Dr. Kathleen Guidroz, assistant professor of sociology and co-director of the gender

studies minor at Mount St. Mary's University in Emmitsburg, pointed out that one study found that to attain Barbie's measurements, the average woman would have to become 24 inches taller, have five more inches in her chest and six fewer inches at her waist. Her neck would have to be three inches longer.

"It's very unrealistic," said Dr. Guidroz, whose university will offer an academic discussion about Barbie sometime in the early spring.

Dr. Guidroz cited British studies that showed that young girls who had been exposed to Barbie reported lower self-esteem regarding the body.

"Clearly, that means girls can internalize this notion that Barbie's body is the ideal body," Dr. Guidroz said.

Jason Evert, a California-based Catholic lecturer who speaks on chastity throughout the country, said girls are constantly bombarded with images of Barbie and Barbie wannabes.

"They're told if they look like Barbie, they'll find love," Mr. Evert said. "Barbie is a product of the culture. She's just one of the millions of elements like MTV, magazine covers and movies that are pushing girls away from modesty and dignity."

In his chastity talks to teens, Mr. Evert often waves a Barbie doll clad in fishnet stockings, short skirt and strapless top.

"It's desensitizing to kids to play with toys that look like prostitutes," he said. "By the time they're in fourth grade, when it comes time to buy an outfit, it doesn't strike them as anything out of the ordinary to buy something immodest."

Mr. Evert reminds teens that when they dress like Barbie, they unknowingly attract men who think the body is the best thing about them.

He strongly urges parents not to buy Barbies for their children.

"Give them a real icon of womanhood," he said. "You can get action figures of the Blessed Virgin now in Christian bookstores. Push a button on her back and she recites the Magnificat."

Dr. Barbara Vann, a sociologist at Loyola College in Maryland who also teaches in the gender studies department, agreed that there is little – if any – good in Barbie.

“If you look at the eating disorders that are out there today, it’s really hard not to suggest there is some link there,” Dr. Vann said.

The professor noticed that in several of the academic papers produced by her students, young women reported that they believed they were overweight in comparing themselves with Barbie and Barbie-like models.

“I think Barbie has not done any favors for girls,” she said. “Barbie’s lifestyle – with dream homes and fancy dresses and clothes – presents a very one-sided image of femininity.”

Dr. Vann is alarmed that Barbie encourages young girls to play with toys geared to adult themes. While Barbie is in her 20s, she is popular with 8- and 9-year-olds. That’s no accident.

## **Wide appeal**

Dr. Arnold T. Blumberg, curator of Geppi’s Entertainment Museum, explained that before Barbie, people assumed girls only wanted to play with baby dolls. Then, Ruth Handler, wife of a Mattel-Handler executive, bought a German Bild Lilli doll in 1955.

“The adult female doll with an extensive wardrobe inspired Ruth, who had also noticed that her own daughter preferred to play with adult dolls,” Dr. Blumberg said. The husband-and-wife team bought the Lilli patent and named the American version Barbie Millicent Roberts, he said.

Despite the many voices that protest Barbie’s influence on the culture, there’s no denying her popularity. In her first year of production, Barbie sold more than 350,000 dolls. In 10 years, she generated more than half a billion dollars in sales.

“When she first came out, she was marketed as a fashion model appealing to young girls,” Dr. Guidroz said. “I think her appeal is that she has no flaws on her body. She is forever beautiful. She always has good clothes and a boyfriend.”

Leslie Reader is among Barbie's legions of admirers.

When Ms. Reader recently walked into Geppi's Entertainment Museum, her face brightened as she surveyed the ever-smiling collection of bedazzled dolls dating back to the original 1959 edition.

"Isn't it fabulous?" the Salt Lake City resident said.

"She's beautiful and the gowns are just gorgeous," she marveled.

The 36-year-old mother still has a collection of her own childhood Barbie dolls, and her 9-year-old daughter plays with them, too.

"When we played with them, it was all about the friendship," Ms. Reader said. "We acted out scenes with the dolls and played out intricate relationships. It was fun."

Ms. Reader believes Barbie is an innocent toy and far superior to graphic video games. Although Barbie's first job was a fashion model, in recent incarnations she's been a nurse, an Olympic athlete, a ballerina, an astronaut and a presidential candidate. She is portrayed in a variety of races. Those are all positive features, according to Ms. Reader.

Friend or fiend, no one's kicking Barbie out of the pink Corvette anytime soon.

*For more information about the Barbie exhibition at Geppi's Entertainment Museum, visit [www.geppismuseum.com](http://www.geppismuseum.com).*