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Making war, and then some sort of peace, with Barbie

When my daughter Naomi turned 4, she received her first two Barbie dolls. In most households this would not matter. In mine, Barbies were expressly verboten. I didn't care if they had been revamped and had new careers such as Detective Barbie or even President Barbie — I didn't want my daughter unduly influenced by a doll that advocated excessive consumerism and a distorted, impossible body image.

My position was clear: If mothers of boys could forbid toy guns and violence-promoting action figures, I could ban Barbie.

But in a flash, it was too late, because Naomi, who had been begging me for a Barbie doll for some time, had been offered two from the treasured private collection of her 11-year-old aunt. Now I was in a bind. The giving was so spontaneous and generous, I was reluctant to show my disapproval, lest Naomi misunderstand. Stuck in one of those unenviable parental binds, I knew I was going to have to yield. As I watched Naomi playing joyously with her new dolls I knew she was way too young to understand why I opposed the plastic bubblehead. However, as a feminist parent I believe it is never too early to plant a seed, particularly with my fast learning daughter.

"Ha," I said, grabbing Barbie and twisting her leg into an awkward position, secretly hoping it would come off so we could toss her in the trash. "Look how long these are. How silly." I turned Barbie over and lifted up her shirt. "And these boobs? Have you ever seen such enormous ones?" (Never mind that the answer is yes, since in fact I am frequently pulling out my own enormous ones to nurse her baby brother).

But then right on cue, as if planted from Mattel to weed out dangerous mothers like me, her aunt piped up. "I wish I had a body like Barbie."

"Why" I asked, wanting to be sure that I wasn't imagining this exchange.

"Because she's so skinny. Look at those hips. I wish I were that thin."

First Person

by Diana Friedman

Never mind that this 11-year-old girl is not only gorgeous, but also a spectacular athlete. Thank goodness for Barbie to remind us that.

We are not quite good enough. I looked over at Naomi, worried that she was already being corrupted beyond repair, but was relieved to see she was bouncing Barbie on her head across the carpet like a horse. I sighed. Maybe there was still time.

That night Naomi brushed her teeth with her Barbies, read them a story and announced she was going to sleep with one. Then, much to my delight, hurled the other one across the room. Think Head first, right into the door.

While she slept, I struggled to decide whether this little piece of plastic was worth the worry. The doll seemed so innocent with that happy pasty smile. But she also radiated all those things I have been trying to teach my daughter not to be — passive, compliant and worried about clothes. As the night wore on, I couldn't stop fantasizing about how to furtively eliminate the dolls. Finally I decided I could run a series of scientific experiments on Barbie and if something happened to her in the process, well, that would be sad, wouldn't it? By midnight, I had come up with the following hypotheses to test:

Throwability: Since Barbie is shaped like a projectile, does she fly like a one when hurled from a speeding car?

Meltability: How long would it take her to reach her melting point in a toaster oven?

Sailability: If her legs were put at a 180 degree angle, one down as a rudder, the other up with a sail, would she sink or float in the bathtub?

And, my favorite: **Chewability:** If accidentally handed to baby brother or pet German shepherd puppy to gum, would Barbie remain the favored toy?

With a vivid image of this last test drifting through my head, I finally relaxed and fell asleep.

It turned out that I never got to

run the experiments. Once the euphoria wore off Naomi no longer asked for Barbies and rarely played with the ones she had. She still bounced between her toys.

On those days when she does want to play with them, though, we all get into it in our own particular way and I am pleased to say that I have made a tentative peace with Barbie. All it took was a little imagination. One hot and sticky day last summer, we removed their clothes and pretended to take them skinny-dipping.

"Ha ha," I laughed. "Look at those silly Barbies."

"Yes," agreed Naomi, completely brainwashed by now. "They sure are funny looking. Who would want legs that big?"

So we helped Barbies train for their triathlon; they swam laps, raced bikes and ran. When it was time to go home we put them on their pretend motorcycles and they roared to a restaurant, where I assured Naomi, they ate a VERY big meal.