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New wave of dolls delivers positive messages

[Karen Goldberg Goff](#)

Call them the alternative Barbies.

The iconic doll recently celebrated her 50th birthday with a pink cake, a party at her Malibu dream house — and an 8 percent fall in sales during the third quarter of 2009. She's also faced a half-century of fighting off critics and parents, who say Barbie is too sexy for the young girls who play with her.

That has left a spot on the shelves for companies that have created dolls just a little more modestly dressed and with a girl-power message that trumps even Barbie's NASA flight suit.

"A lot of parents have looked at the fashion dolls that are out there encouraging girls to be something they are not," says Chris Rainey, vice president of marketing for Kerusso, an Arkansas-based company that makes Christian products, including a line of dolls known as God's Girlz.

God's Girlz recently introduced a black character, Imani, to its line of dolls. Imani joins Abigail, Sarah and Hannah in bringing girls a fashion doll with a message, Mr. Rainey says.

"God's Girlz are fashionable, yet modest," he says. "Their body shapes are not disproportionate. This is a doll that any mom or dad is going to feel comfortable giving to their child."

God's Girlz have a more overt message, too. Take Abigail, the line's rocker chick who wears a "Pick Jesus" T-shirt under her "leather" jacket. Additional accessories for the dolls include T-shirts

that say "I'm a God's Girl," along with more typical fashion doll accoutrements such as mini hairbrushes and cell phones.

God's Girlz were introduced 18 months ago, and its first shipment sold out within a few months, Mr. Rainey says. The dolls are available at Christian bookstores and on the company Web site (<http://shop.kerusso.com>).

Meanwhile, a California company, the Only Hearts Club, has designed a nondenominational doll line with a message of friendship. The line consists of eight dolls — "The Only Hearts Club" — who "have pledged to listen with their hearts and be nice to others."

There is the outdoorsy Lily Rose, the musical Karina Rose, the sporty Briana Joy, and the shy Hannah Faith, to name a few. The dolls' back stories cover a variety of ethnic backgrounds, and their stories are developed further in a series of books. In each book, one of the girls is faced with a dilemma that requires her to think for herself and decide how to do the right thing.

"The right thing," is usually more complex than what to wear. In fact, the Only Hearts dolls are meant to be more like the young girls who play with them than a teenager. The dolls are more proportionate and dressed more like a second-grader.

Company founder Len Simonian, the parent of a preteen daughter, says parents do not have to let their daughters grow up too soon. He says guiding and protecting girls "does not mean sheltering her in a bubble," but it does mean parents should proactively look for good alternatives when it comes from everything to Internet usage to fashion to toys.

Diane Levin, professor of education at Wheelock College in Massachusetts and co-author of the book "So Sexy So Soon: The New Sexualized Childhood and How Parents Can Protect Their Kids," says as girls play with fashion dolls at younger and younger ages, the features of some of those dolls become more and more extreme.

When Barbie came on the scene in the late 1950s, girls might still play with dolls until they were on the brink of being teens, Ms. Levin says. Now, peak doll years end at about age 8, so marketers have had to make them more cartoonlike to appeal to youngsters. That's why, for instance, the Bratz — which now outsell Barbies in the United States — have gigantic, sparkly eyes and short, swingy skirts, and action figures have bigger muscles.

Ms. Levin says alternatives to such dolls have been welcomed in the market, but it's not an easy task for those alternatives to compete. However, the back stories of dolls such as the Only Hearts Club can be a diversion from the typical doll worlds of appearance/fashion/shopping/get a boyfriend, she says.

"The Only Hearts dolls offer a broader range of possible behaviors," says Ms. Levin. "They are still skinny, but not that skinny. There are still products and clothes to buy. So the consumer message is still to buy, buy, buy."

Whether a parent purchases the toy cell phone or not, a doll that flies slightly under the radar is going to leave more possibilities for imaginative play, says Ms. Levin. Once a doll has a TV show or other screencentric tie-in, the children "become like robots," she says.

"Once there is a TV show, they start imitating it," says Ms. Levin. "It becomes remote-control play. They imitate the sexiness."

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