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Christmas 2018: Equal to the Task

Toying with inclusivity

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*Efforts to represent disability in the toy box must go beyond tokenism, say **Desmond O'Neill** and colleagues*

Even with the advent of electronic games, toys remain an integral element of the Christmas experience. The centrality of toys to the childhood experience since ancient times has had relatively little impact on the biomedical literature, other than references in paediatric literature to hazards such as flammability and choking.[1] This is surprising, as the potent symbolism of playthings provides a window into rich sociological and psychological narratives, most tellingly in studies of gender and ethnicity.[2]

Representing disability

Less well recognised is how toys reflect, or fail to reflect, disability and inclusion. For example, adapting toys has been shown to facilitate play routines among children with a disability.[3] And toys that represent disability can reduce the anxiety and prejudice that children without disabilities may experience towards peers with disabilities [4].

But there's been little headway in representing disability in the toy industry. Here we reflect on the attempts at representing disability in the toy box and possible ways to achieve this. **The inclusion of toys reflecting disability is a recent phenomenon – analysis of a catalogue from a major US toy retailer revealed only two disability-themed toys between 1930 and 1963. This absence led to movements such as #toylikeme, founded in 2015 to promote toys representing disability. The impulse for this eloquently expressed by one of the founders of this movement, Rebecca**

Atkinson: “When I was growing up, I never saw a doll like me. What does that say to deaf and disabled children? That they aren’t worth it? That they’re invisible in the toys that they play with? That they’re invisible in society?”

An interesting experiment by a major toy manufacturer in the 1990s provides an illuminating perspective on the challenges of inclusivity and mainstreaming disability through toys. In 1997, coinciding with new disability legislation in the US, Mattel produced a new variant of its iconic Barbie doll.[5] Working with the National Parent Network on Disabilities, the company produced a cousin for Barbie: Share-a-Smile Becky.

Becky used a realistically scaled wheelchair that accommodated a backpack (fig 1). From a clinical perspective the origin of her disability was not clear, as her tone and muscle mass were strikingly similar to her able bodied cousin, Barbie. But her introduction was initially welcomed widely in the media and among disability activists as an enlightened expansion of diversity in an influential sphere of human experience.

Fig 1 Share-a-Smile Becky, by Mattell

However, storm clouds soon began to gather. As anyone who uses a wheelchair will know, despite advances in promoting universal design our society still presents multiple barriers to people with disabilities in almost every environment. Barbie’s house and cars were no exception and, akin to her human counterparts, her home and car were found to be inaccessible to Becky.[ok?] The doorways in the Barbie house would need to be increased by an estimated 30% to accommodate Becky and her wheelchair.

Various advocacy groups began to agitate vociferously for adaptation of the Barbie milieu, and Mattel made reassuring noises about reconfiguring the environments for Becky. This would presumably have entailed a major increase in cost, and it never happened. Instead, eight months later when the hue and cry had abated, the company dropped Becky from its product line.

Becky’s demise raises interesting reflections on advocacy for inclusive toys, particularly the challenges of timing and unintended consequences. Few would doubt[ok?] the righteousness of the advocates’ concerns, but the disappearance of a figure with a visible disability from a mainstream range of toys is disappointing, as was

the fleeting appearance of old age in the shape of Grandma Barbie and Grandpa Ken—grey haired but remarkably trim and toned examples of healthy ageing.

Might a gentler tone and a subtler advocacy strategy have preserved Becky and provided an opportunity for discussion, advocacy, and awareness for future generations of children? One of the Grimm brothers' fairy tales, *The Old Man and His Grandson*, uses this approach to demonstrate how children perceive ageism through playthings. We should expect toy makers to produce a diverse range of toys because they should pay attention to the moral need for such toys, incorporate research showing how important it is, and understand that they are marketing to the future. In addition to the value of corporate social responsibility, one potential agent of change is the growing awareness of the commercial advantage of inclusive design and advertising. Advertising campaigns demonstrate the increasing power of the purple pound (the spending power of those with disabilities, now estimated in the UK at £212bn). Clothing company, River Island launched once such campaign in 2018 entitled 'labels are for clothes' whilst Marks and Spencer launched an 'easy dressing' range this year. The movement towards mainstreaming of education for those with disabilities is also likely to open new markets.

Children's views

The perspectives of children with disabilities are also relevant. When faced with a choice of dolls with features of Down's syndrome or dolls without, children with Down's syndrome preferred to play with, and attributed more positive traits to, dolls without the Down's syndrome features[6]. **As the authors of this piece note, this finding points to a need to investigate the stigma that children with Downs Syndrome face: was their preference for the doll without Downs Syndrome reflective of internalised stigma, or a desire to fulfil the social ideal?**

While the interpretation of doll studies in the context of race has been shown to be challenging,[7] as noted by an emerging researcher [8] in the area of toys and disability,[Does this relate to ref 7 or ref 8?] it would be perverse to fail to interpret this study[ok?] yes and not reflect on the importance of toys representing diversity to all children, with wider and better representation of diversity.[8] . Campaigns like #toylikeme whose petition for toys representing disabilities in 2016 garnered 20 000

signatures have highlighted the desires of children with disabilities to see themselves represented by the toy industry. Such representation is likely to have reciprocal benefit for those without disabilities, as such toys have been shown to enable children to think positively about their interactions with peers with a disability[4].

A possible path for the future lies in providing disability aids such as wheelchairs and crutches developed by third party companies for Barbie, Ken, and other similar dolls. Alternatively, it's encouraging that Lego launched a city set that included a child in a wheelchair, without fanfare[9]: the flexibility of the bricks would facilitate universal design,[10] through elements such as larger doorways, for new generations of children. These could be introduced sensitively into national programmes for information about diversity in educational settings[11]—arousing curiosity, awareness, and the will to do better in adapting our environment to inclusive design.

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