



Roominate, a dollhouse building kit created by Alice Brooks and Bettina Chen, is designed to inspire confidence among girls and an interest in STEM (science, technology, engineering and math).

New Toys for Girls

It's Not All About Pink Anymore

By Colette Connolly

In a world where gender stereotyped toys make up the bulk of the products marketed to children and their parents, there's a quiet, yet determined, effort to create alternatives for girls that go beyond the attractive fashion doll, the baby doll that requires nurturing or the princess needing a wardrobe change.

Five enterprising ladies have created an array of products, some of them stimulating girls' brains in the area of math and science, others promoting self-appreciation of one's unique talents and skills.

The women, each heading up separate ventures, agree that girls and their parents are subjected to thousands of media messages on a daily basis, something that often shapes their purchasing habits and their preference for a particular toy.

Carolyn Danckaert, co-founder of A Mighty Girl, a popular website featuring the world's largest collection of girl-empowering books, movies, toys, music and clothing, concurs. "There's definitely a limited color spectrum of toys marketed to girls who want and deserve more choices beyond pink and purple."

PROMOTING A POSITIVE IMAGE

“Whether you are an artist, a writer, a mathematician or a scientist, it’s about who you are on the inside that matters,” says Jodi Norgaard, founder and CEO of the Dream Big Toy Company, the makers of the Go! Go! Sports Girls dolls.

Norgaard knows firsthand what’s available on toy store shelves. When her daughter was 9, she found it near impossible to find a doll that didn’t have bleached blond hair, short skirts, high heels, big hair and lots of makeup. “They were like Barbie, but much worse,” Norgaard adds. “I said to myself, so this is being marketed to little girls?”

Norgaard purchased one of the dolls, not as a toy for her child but to show her husband what was being targeted to girls. Thinking that she could create a better, more positive alternative for her daughter, Norgaard dreamed up the Go! Go! Sports Girls doll collection that consists of a line of soft, comfortable dolls that more accurately reflect the bodies of real girls.

The Chicago native knew she was taking on a huge task. The size of the domestic toy market is estimated to be \$20 billion a year, with about \$19 billion of that attributed to imports from China. But Norgaard, a fitness enthusiast, was confident in her ability to create a product that would make a difference and empower young girls to think differently about themselves.

For the past four years, she has been busy designing and marketing the doll line. The plush dolls all have sporty names such as Sam Softball, Cassie Soccer, Ella Running and Gracie Tennis. All of the dolls include a “secret tummy message” that reflects their personalities. For instance, Sam Softball reads “Dream Big Home Run,” while Cassie Soccer reads “Dream Big Score Goals.”

A detailed description accompanies each doll and is intended to promote healthy living, exercise and the importance of eating well and getting adequate sleep. There are currently 14 dolls in the line.

ENGINEERING MADE INTERESTING

When Debbie Sterling came up with the idea of GoldieBlox, her primary goal was to encourage girls to build. Sterling had no exposure to engineering as a child. In fact, she was more interested in stuffed animals and playing dress up. But in high school, she discovered an affinity for math.

“I never thought I would major in engineering,” says Sterling, who graduated from Stanford University with a master’s degree in the discipline. A high school teacher urged her to pursue engineering in college, but it wasn’t until she took a freshman engineering class that Sterling realized how creative the subject could be.

In January 2012, Sterling came up with the idea for GoldieBlox, a construction toy and book series based on the character Goldie, an inventor who loves to build. Inspiration for the name came from the Goldilocks fairy tale. Ironically, it’s the one name that was never licensed by Disney, so Sterling felt her take on it might lend some familiarity to the toy.

GoldieBlox is intended to both engage and

challenge girls to build with a problem-solving purpose. The construction set, which includes materials inspired by household objects and craft items, also includes a variety of character figurines from Goldie’s story.

During a yearlong research phase, Sterling discovered that pink is not necessarily what girls are attracted to. Boys have strong spatial skills, which explains their love of construction toys, but girls tend to have superior verbal skills and that translates to a love of reading, stories and characters, she notes. “We’ve found that girls get inspiration from Goldie’s story,” adds Sterling, referring to the hundreds of letters she’s received from parents over the past year.

What’s been particularly gratifying to Sterling, a Boston native, is the notion that girls are inspired to build their own objects after playing with the toy. “GoldieBlox is the best of both worlds, reading and building,” says Sterling. “Goldie’s stories relate to girls’ lives, and the machines Goldie builds solve problems and help her friends. As girls read along, they want to be like Goldie and do what she does.”

EVERY GIRL’S A BUILDER

That kind of passion is a “ticket to discovery” for many girls, says Hartsdale psychologist Erica Saxe Ross. “Introducing girls to skills that are unknown to them is not a bad idea,” she says.

In fact, inventors Alice Brooks and Bettina Chen, also Stanford University grads, had that in mind when they created Roominate, a dollhouse building kit that is designed to inspire confidence among girls and an interest in STEM (science, technology, engineering and math).

Brooks, the daughter of a scientist, remembers getting a mini saw for her 8th birthday and then

constructing a doll with it. Chen spent much of her childhood playing with her older brother’s Lego sets and Lincoln Logs.

“The idea of solving a problem is very important to an engineer,” says Brooks. “You look at the resources and at the tools around you and you craft a solution that no one else has done before.”

Like Norgaard, both women knew the importance of storytelling to a girl’s play experience and wanted to create a toy that would give them a lot of creative control. Their desire to create a new kind of toy for girls that was both intuitive and fun was also fueled by the gender imbalances they saw in their own engineering classes at Stanford.

After several iterations and a lengthy testing process that involved hundreds of 4- to 12-year-old girls, Brooks and Chen launched Roominate in 2012. The toy includes a color-coded circuit board that allows players to create their own rooms, craft their own furniture, connect their own circuits and decorate their house any way they want. Players can stack rooms on top of each other or attach them side-by-side to build an even bigger model.

Brooks says they wanted to create a toy that would enable girls to explore and become comfortable with the materials as well as developing an intuitive understanding of the physical world. Both women say that’s how they learned as children and it’s what helped them become comfortable with engineering concepts.

Having launched the product at the San Francisco Maker Faire last year, an event created by Make Magazine to highlight new and innovative do-it-yourself products, and then testing it out with hundreds of children, Chen says the product has certainly created a lot of buzz. “I think we’ve definitely got girls asking more questions about how things work.”

Resource Box

GoldieBlox

Available in a number of independent toy stores across the country and more recently in Toys R Us. Order online at goldieblox.com.

Go! Go! Sports Girls

Shop online at Amazon and Wayfair.com and on the websites of Toys R Us, Walmart, Sears and FAO Schwarz. Visit the company website at gogosportsgirls.com. The company’s latest product, “Read & Play,” will be available for online purchase in September and in select Walmart stores in February 2014.

Kaskey Kids

Available in stores across the country, throughout Canada and online at kaskeykids.com.

Roominate

Shop at roominatetoy.com.

A Mighty Girl

Amightygirl.com has more than 2,000 toy listings, with everything from dolls to science toys to arts and crafts.



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CREATIVITY AND IMAGINATION

When Christy Kaskey, CEO of Kaskey Kids, set out to purchase sports toys for her two young boys, she found it difficult to find anything that was suitable for them, especially for children ages 2 to 3.

It was around that time that Kaskey, now the mother of four, designed a series of sports figures geared toward boys. But once her daughter was born a few years later, she wanted something a little different. "There were no sports action figures for girls except for a sporty doll dressed in a uniform," Kaskey recalls.

Her research revealed that girls like details, especially when it comes to playing with toys. So Kaskey, a former executive for Nestle and Johnson & Johnson, designed the Soccer Girls figures with that in mind, paying attention to their hair and eye color, making sure they reflected different ethnicities, adding accessories like pony tail holders as well as molding them in stances that mirror that of real soccer players.

"The play is also very precise with girls," says Kaskey, referring to the way in which girls set up the sports figurines on the portable playing field and then add their own stuffed toys as spectators.

Saxe Ross says games that challenge girls to think and that encourage creativity and imagination is valuable for a whole host of reasons. Playing with a ball or a hoola hoop trains gross motor skills while manipulating smaller objects, like Kaskey's plastic two-inch figures, builds a child's fine motor skills, she explains.

Ross says it's important that girls are exposed to different types of games, and not just games that they might naturally gravitate to or excel in. However, "Even if a girl is good at building, it shouldn't be the only game she is exposed to," she says.

It's clear that girls today can benefit from the choice of toys offered in the modern marketplace. For parents interested in exposing their daughters to more than the standard fare, these new toys come as a welcome addition. Encouraging girls to use their imagination and problem-solving skills can go a long way in helping them meet the challenges of the current social structure and workplace demands.

Colette Connolly is a freelance writer who frequently contributes to Westchester Family, reporting on a variety of topics including health, education and family matters. Colette resides in the Bronxville area.