

LESSON PLAN

Barbie, Identity and Representation

Compelling Question: To what extent does Barbie reflect and represent people in our society?

Grade Level		Time	Common Core Standards
K-1	2-5	45 minutes	Reading, Writing, Speaking and Listening.
4-8	8-12		



Web Related Connections

LESSON PLANS

[Emojis and Me](#)[Identity, Hair and Seeing Myself](#)[Dolls are Us](#)[On-Screen Diversity: Why Visibility in Media Matters](#)[Who Am I? Identity Poems](#)

Other Resources:

[Diversity in Media and Why Visibility Matters](#)[Safe and Inclusive Schools for All](#)[Why We Need Diverse Books](#)

Key Words

beauty standard
 bias
 diversity
 gender norms
 identity
 immigrants
 reflect
 represent
 stereotype
 traditional

LESSON OVERVIEW

Barbie is a toy doll that was created in 1959 by businesswoman Ruth Handler, who co-founded the toy company Mattel with her husband. The first Barbie doll debuted at the New York Toy Fair in March 1959. Handler didn't want Barbie to be portrayed only as a wife and mother, but also as a "career woman." Barbie sold 300,000 dolls in that first year and quickly became a household name and its success continued from there. Over the years, Barbie has changed and evolved. The toy company has made various attempts at diversifying the doll in terms of race, ethnicity, disability, body size, etc. to be more inclusive and more reflective of our diverse society. The topic of Barbie raises issues of identity, diversity, representation and bias and the 2023 release of the film Barbie has ignited much public conversation and social commentary on the topic.

This lesson provides an opportunity for students to learn more about Barbie, reflect on their own experiences and opinions about Barbie, explore whether Barbie reflects our society and consider what identities may be missing from Barbie's collection.

LEARNING OBJECTIVES

- Students will understand some of the history of Barbie's identity characteristics.
- Students will reflect on their thoughts and opinions about the role of Barbie in society.
- Students will explore the extent to which Barbie reflects and represents the diversity of our society.
- Students will consider how Barbie could be more inclusive and will conceptualize a new one.

MATERIALS AND PREPARATION

- Here I Am Statement Signs (prepared in advance): "Strongly Agree," "Agree," "In between/not sure," "Disagree," and "Strongly Disagree"
- [Barbie Background Information](#) (provide one for each student)
- Drawing materials (paper, crayons, markers and/or colored pencils) for all students



Information Sharing: Who is Barbie?

1. Begin the lesson by asking students: *Who is Barbie? What do you know about Barbie? What is memorable, important or meaningful about Barbie? When you picture Barbie in your mind, who do you see?*
2. Share the Background information about Barbie, either by providing a summary for students of some/all of the following information or by reading the [Barbie Background Information](#) together out loud.
 - Barbie was created by businesswoman Ruth Handler, a Jewish woman and the daughter of two Polish immigrants. Handler co-founded the toy company Mattel with her husband Elliot Handler and their partner Harold Matson. Handler was the mother of two children; she had seen her daughter Barbara (who Barbie was named for) play with friends and realized they preferred more grown-up dolls than the baby dolls that they were normally given as toys.
 - The first Barbie doll debuted at the New York Toy Fair in March 1959. Ruth Handler didn't want Barbie to be only a wife and mother, but also a "career woman." Barbie sold 300,000 dolls in that first year; the success continued from there. Decades later in 1992, the slogan "You Can Be Anything" was used, inspired by the strong women that raised Handler.
 - While many of the Barbie dolls present as white with blonde hair, there have been different races of Barbie dolls throughout the years.
 - In 1967, Mattel launched the first African American Barbie Doll named "Colored Francie," based on a white doll called Francie. One year later, Mattel released Christie, considered the first African American doll in the Barbie range. In 1969, Mattel launched a Barbie doll based on Nurse Julia, a Black character from the show *Julia*. 1980 is the first year in which there was a Black Barbie doll, the first Black Barbie doll and not a "friend" Barbie.
 - During the 1960s and early 1970s, critics advocated for more authentic and inclusive representation of different races and ethnicities in toys and media. Christie was criticized for not representing African cultural body image and for representing only one skin color tone and her features were seen as reflecting white "standards of beauty."
 - Starting in 1981, Mattel focused more on diversity in the Barbie line and introduced the "Dolls of the World" Barbie collection, a series of dolls that showcased different cultures and countries from around the world. In 1988, the first Latina Barbie doll was released; she was named Teresa and it was never explicitly stated that she was Latina and her features were supposed to be "ambiguous" (unclear as to her race and ethnicity).
 - After criticism of its Black dolls, Mattel created new molds with different facial features, skin tones, hair textures, and names. Diverse face sculpts began in 1991 and diverse body types in 2016. Body shapes were altered, but the proportions remained the same to ensure clothing and accessories could be used by all the dolls in the collection. In 1996, Mattel introduced a new Black doll named Nikki as part of the "Teen Skipper" line, as the younger sister of Christie. In 2007, she replaced Christie as one of Barbie's friends.
 - In terms of AAPI (Asian American Pacific Islander) representation, in 1988, Miko was introduced as Barbie's first Asian friend. In 2023, Chinese American actress Anna Mae Wong was added to the "Inspiring Women" series.
 - Ruth Handler, who created Barbie, wanted the doll to be a "career woman." Barbie was an astronaut almost two decades before a woman went into space and there was a Barbie president in 1992. Over the years, Barbie has had over 200 careers including actor, chef, dancer, film director, photographer, business executive, cashier, food truck operator, English teacher, Science teacher, dentist, doctor, surgeon, campaign manager, paratrooper, president, detective, astrophysicist, baseball player, skateboard, race car driver, usher, zookeeper, and many more.

- Over the years, there have not been many Barbie dolls with disabilities. The first Barbie using a wheelchair was Share a Smile Becky, who was introduced in 1997 as a Toys 'r Us exclusive. The line was later expanded to include both Barbie and Christie. In 2019 with the creation of the "Barbie Fashionista" line, there is a Barbie who uses a wheelchair. In 2023, Mattel introduced its first-ever version of the Barbie doll representing a person with Down syndrome, the company noting that they worked closely with the National Down Syndrome Society in its development. There is also a Barbie who uses a behind-the-ear hearing aid and a Barbie with a prosthetic leg.
 - In 2018, Mattel released the first Barbie doll to wear a hijab (a headscarf worn by some Muslim women), which was modelled on the U.S. Olympic fencer Ibtihaj Muhammad.
 - Barbie has been widely criticized over the years due to the doll's physical size (being extremely thin), her unrealistic body proportions, and because she upholds gender stereotypes about what women should look like. In a [2023 study](#), nearly 1000 women shared about the impact of Barbie dolls on their body image and how specifically they compare themselves; 82% believe Barbie portrays unrealistic body expectations to girls and women. In 2016, Barbie added three new body shapes to the dolls: "petite, tall and curvy" in addition to her traditional slender body type.
 - In addition to criticism about Barbie's body type and size, there has also been criticism about Barbie conveying a traditional and stereotypical "standard of beauty," (i.e., features that are considered the most attractive) which is often thought of as "thin, white, blonde straight hair and blue eyes."
 - According to Mattel, "Barbie recognizes the importance of representation and is committed to doing the work to inspire the next generation." According to its website, Barbie currently includes 35 skin tones, 97 hairstyles and 9 body types.
 - Barbie has earned at least \$1 billion in each of the last five years. This includes over 50 product categories including dolls, dollhouses, cars and vehicles, clothes and closets, playsets and much more.
3. After sharing some or all of this information, engage students in a brief discussing by asking:
- What surprised you in what you heard?
 - What is your biggest takeaway from learning this about Barbie?
 - What did you learn about Barbie that you didn't know before?
 - What more do you want to know about Barbie, the history of Barbie, or Barbie's impact on individuals and society?

? What is Identity and Representation?

1. Ask students: *What does identity mean?* Elicit and explain that identity is: "the qualities, beliefs, etc. that make a particular person or group different from others." You can explain that when we talk about social identity groups, we are referring to someone's race, religion, ethnicity, gender, gender identity, sexual orientation, etc. Ask: *What does identity have to do with Barbie?*
2. Ask students: *What does representation (or "to represent") mean?* Elicit and explain that "to represent" means "to stand for a group that shares similar identity characteristics such as race, religion, gender, sexual orientation, etc."
3. Post the definitions of identity and representation on the board/smart board.

Then ask: *What does this have to do with Barbie and dolls/toys in general?* Briefly explain why it is important that people in different identity groups are represented in various aspects of our society, including games, toys, books, movies, television, etc. It is important that everyone, especially children as they are growing up, gets to see themselves reflected so they can feel visible, seen and valued in our society and world. Elicit from students that sometimes certain groups are less visible and not as well represented, or not represented

at all or poorly represented, in our society. This is especially important for those in groups that are often discriminated against and those in marginalized groups, which makes it more important to make sure those groups are represented, and represented with accuracy and complexity.

4. Ask students: *Does Barbie represent you or groups you identify with? Does Barbie represent us as a society?* Invite students to turn and talk with someone sitting near them and share their responses with each other to these questions.
5. Then reconvene the class and engage in a brief discussion, asking if anyone would like to share their thoughts from the partner sharing.

Here I Am: My Thoughts and Opinions about Barbie

1. Explain to students that in the “Here I Am” activity, they will explore their thoughts and feelings about Barbie, identity, representation and bias. Explain that they will listen to statements and decide whether they agree or disagree with the statement. Then, based on their opinion about each statement, students will position themselves along an imaginary line, depending upon how strongly they agree or disagree with the statement.
2. Select a large open space and indicate the position of an imaginary line that indicates the farthest right point representing a “Strongly Agree” response and the farthest left point a “Strongly Disagree” response. In between these two positions, indicate “Agree,” “In Between/Not Sure” and “Disagree” along the continuum. Create signs with these words in advance and hang them up on the wall.

[Note: If you are doing this activity online or in a space that is unable to accommodate students moving around, conduct a poll instead, with students raising hands or using a digital poll like Google forms, [Mentimeter](#) or a poll included in your learning platform. Another option is to have students do “fist to five” in which they use their hand/fingers to show where they are on the continuum—5 fingers mean they strongly agree, fist/no fingers mean they strongly disagree, and other numbers are somewhere on the continuum.]

3. Read each statement (or choose a sub-set of them, especially for younger students) below, inviting students to take a minute to decide where they will position themselves in the continuum. Then, have them move silently to that place and observe where others are. After students have chosen their spots, have them spend 2–3 minutes talking amongst themselves about why they are situated there. Then, ask someone from each part of the room to share their thoughts with the class about why they are positioned in their spots. Use this process for each of the statements.
 - I played with Barbies or have had Barbies in my household.
 - Barbie has a positive impact on children who play with her.
 - Barbie reflects the diversity of people in our society.
 - Barbie was “ahead of her time.” (Explain that “ahead of her time” means Barbie and their creators had new ideas a long time before other people started the same way.)
 - I agree with the criticism of Barbie that the doll portrays an image of beauty that is narrow and unrealistic.
 - Barbie sends children biased messages about identity and diversity.
 - Toy companies should try to create toys and dolls that help children see themselves in those toys.
 - Barbie has changed a lot over the years.
4. After discussing each of the statements, reconvene the class. Engage students in a class discussion using the following questions.
 - Was it easy or difficult to decide where to position yourself? Were some statements easier to decide and some more difficult?
 - What did you learn about yourself? What did you learn about others?

- Was there anything that was said or shared that changed or challenged what you thought before? Please explain.
 - Have you changed your opinion during or after the activity? Please explain.
 - What did you learn from this activity?
5. Optional: Have students do a 3–5-minute “Quick Write” that responds to the following question: After doing this activity, have you either changed your position in some way or feel more certain in your position? You can use choose to focus on one of the statements used in “Here I Am” activity, or the ideas as a whole.



Design a New Doll

1. Ask students: *If you could design a new Barbie (or any type of doll) to represent you or someone else (or an identity group) who you don't feel is represented, what kind of Barbie would you create?* As a class, brainstorm a list of ideas.
2. Invite students to choose an idea for a new Barbie (or another doll they want to name after themselves or someone they know) to create. Provide drawing materials and have them (either during class time or for homework) create a drawing design of the Barbie. In addition, have them write a short (one paragraph, 4-5 sentences) description about the new Barbie, sharing in the description why this is an important and meaningful Barbie to add to the collection.
3. Have students share their Barbie drawings and descriptions with the class.

Optional: Additional Follow-up Extension Activities

- Have students conduct additional research on one aspect of Barbie's identity and representation over the years (race, ethnicity, disability, body image, etc.).
- Engage students in conducting a school-wide survey to learn more about students' experiences and opinions about Barbie, using questions from the “Here I Am” activity and adding questions they would like to ask.
- Invite students to write letters to toy companies with their opinions about dolls, inclusion and representation and have them send those letters if they would like to.
- Assign students to watch the 2023 Barbie movie and then write a film review for the school or community newsletter/newspaper.
- Invite students to research and explore the history and diversity of the “Ken” doll, which is a doll introduced by Mattel in 1961 (two years after the debut of Barbie).

Closing

Have students share their response to this prompt: Something new I learned about Barbie is

_____.

Additional Reading and Resources

- [43 Surprising Things You Probably Didn't Know About Barbie](#) (Good Housekeeping, July 24, 2023)
- [Barbie](#) (Britannica)
- [Barbie and diversity: a long journey of criticism and change](#) (El Pais, July 20, 2023)
- [Barbie Through the Ages](#) (History, July 14, 2023)
- [Barbie's Careers](#) (Wikipedia)

- [Barbie's Got a New Body](#) (Time)
- [Everything to Know About the 'Barbie' Movie](#) (People, July 24, 2023)
- [Mattel, Maker of Barbie, Debuts Gender-Neutral Dolls](#). (New York Times, September 25, 2019)
- [Mattel's Barbie earns over a billion every year](#) (Fox Business, July 20, 2023)
- [Our Diversity Revolution](#) (Mattel)
- [The Barbie movie contains a nod to the doll's Jewish origins](#) (The Jewish Chronicle, July 19, 2023)
- [The Real History of Barbie: What to Know About America's Most Famous Doll](#) (Teen Vogue, July 28, 2023)
- [Wheelchair Barbie Is a Lesson in the Power of Showing Up Where People Don't Think You Belong](#) (Teen Vogue, July 25, 2023)

Common Core Anchor Standards

CONTENT AREA/STANDARD
Reading
R1: Read closely to determine what the text says explicitly and to make logical inferences from it; cite specific textual evidence when writing or speaking to support conclusions drawn from the text.
Writing
W1: Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence. W2: Write informative/explanatory texts to examine and convey complex ideas and information clearly and accurately through the effective selection, organization, and analysis of content..
Speaking and Listening
SL1: Prepare for and participate effectively in a range of conversations and collaborations with diverse partners, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively. SL2: Integrate and evaluate information presented in diverse media and formats, including visually, quantitatively, and orally. SL3: Evaluate a speaker's point of view, reasoning, and use of evidence and rhetoric. SL5: Make strategic use of digital media and visual displays of data to express information and enhance understanding of presentations.

CASEL's SEL Competencies

COMPETENCIES
Self-Awareness: The abilities to understand one's own emotions, thoughts, and values and how they influence behavior across contexts.
Social Awareness: The abilities to understand the perspectives of and empathize with others, including those from diverse backgrounds, cultures, & contexts.
Relationship Skills: The abilities to establish and maintain healthy and supportive relationships and to effectively navigate settings with diverse individuals and groups.
Responsible Decision-Making: The abilities to make caring and constructive choices about personal behavior and social interactions across diverse situations.

Barbie Background Information

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