

Experts alarmed as free Barbies given to UK primary schools to teach social skills

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Toy company Mattel has been criticized for "stealth marketing" after giving away free Barbie and Ken dolls to schools as part of a program to teach empathy to children, finds an investigation published by *The BMJ*

today.

Investigative journalist Hristio Boytchev reports that Mattel's "Barbie School of Friendship" program, in which free dolls are given for children to carry out role play exercises, has been rolled out to 700 schools across the UK, "with the potential to reach more than 150,000 pupils," according to the company.

Mattel says it has sponsored research which shows playing with dolls offers "major benefits" for [child development](#), including nurturing skills like empathy.

But experts have criticized the program, raising questions about potential negative effects of Barbie dolls in terms of gender stereotyping, questioning the use of research to justify the program, and asking whether companies should be able to freely market their products through schools.

"The project makes me suspicious that it may be exploitative," said Philippa Perry, a psychotherapist and author of books on parenting and education. "I feel faintly repulsed by it." Mark Petticrew, professor of public health evaluation at the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine called the program "alarming."

"Commercial entities like Mattel are not experts in children's health or education, they are experts in selling products to maximize profits," adds May van Schalkwyk, a specialty public health registrar, also at the London School of Hygiene & Tropical Medicine. "The Mattel materials are heavily branded—why should children be exposed to this type of stealth marketing?"

Lisa Georgeson, a teacher at Lord Blyton Primary School in Tyne and Wear, which participated in the program, said the company had offered

free resources "which, given the current lack of funding in schools, is always a positive."

On multiple occasions, in information aimed at teachers, parents and the public, Mattel references the studies it has funded as the basis for the program.

The research is part of a five year collaboration between Mattel and Cardiff University, a Mattel spokesperson says. A paper published in 2020 found higher brain activity in children when they played with Mattel dolls compared with playing games on electronic tablet computers. A Mattel-sponsored reanalysis of the same experiment group concluded in 2022 that the children playing dolls used more "internal state language" describing feelings and thoughts.

Franziska Korb, a psychologist at the Dresden University of Technology, Germany, told *The BMJ* that the study's idea was good and the methodology appropriate, but stressed that the studies found significant differences between [doll](#) and tablet play when each child was playing alone. When children played with an adult, the differences disappeared.

Korb also says the research cannot be used to make statements about long term developmental or behavioral effects.

Sarah Gerson at Cardiff University, the senior author of both studies and recipient of Mattel's [research funding](#), says she finds the program interesting but expressed some reservations. She described Mattel's statement to parents—that the research shows playing with dolls like Barbie offers major benefits—as "a bit strong."

When presented with criticism of the program, a Mattel spokesperson sent anonymous teacher testimonials celebrating the program for the positive response it has elicited in pupils and the diversity of the dolls, in

terms of body type, disability and skin tone.

The spokesperson also told *The BMJ* that because of the positive results, the company will consider expanding the program to other markets.

The Department of Education refused to confirm if it had evaluated the program and told The BMJ that British schools have autonomy to introduce any educational materials they believe are appropriate.

More information: News Analysis: Neuroscience or stealth marketing? Experts alarmed as free Barbies given to UK primary schools to teach social skills, *The BMJ* (2023). [DOI: 10.1136/bmj.p1672](https://doi.org/10.1136/bmj.p1672)

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