

Generations

Barbie is reinvented yet again

On Jan. 28, Mattel again made toy history by releasing yet another new line of Barbie dolls and this time with specific body types: petite, tall and curvy.

I think the petite and tall versions were stuck in the mix just so it wouldn't look obvious that high-ranking executives at Mattel finally realized it was time to showcase a true woman's body type rather than an unrealistic one.

I did a little homework on Barbie, the single most successful doll ever produced. Invented by Ruth Handler, one of the founders of Mattel, Barbie was named after her daughter, Barbara, and made her debut in March 1959 at the American International Toy Fair in New York. She was dressed in a black-and-white-striped bathing suit, shoes and sunglasses, and sold for \$3.

Half of the Toy Fair buyers wanted nothing to do with Barbie, and their blunder cost them dearly. Unpredictable little girls adored the pretty doll, and dolls flew off the shelves by the summer of 1959. Eight months later, Barbie had become a half-million-dollar business.

But Barbie didn't always have it so good. In the late

1960s, the women's movement was riding high, and



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Barbie's unrealistic shape became one of its targets.

By 1971, the National Organization for Women had

launched a full assault on Barbie, condemning Mattel for sexist advertising.

To ease the rumblings, Mattel tried other toys, but none had the clout of Barbie. Stocks tumbled. Management changed. Barbie and her designers persevered and, by 1992, she had returned to the limelight.

Although it took many years, fresh, new designers eventually demanded change, and Barbie added seven skin tones, 22 eye colors, less-garish makeup, and ethnic features.

Barbie was never just a pretty face, according to Mattel's marketing gurus. The company promoted her as an astronaut, paleontologist, jet pilot, surgeon, NASCAR driver and rap artist. She also ran for president three times.

But, without a doubt, the new curvy doll is a big risk for Mattel, and only

time will tell if girls will accept her, too. Barbie does \$1 billion annually in sales across more than 150 countries. Mattel has received complaints from irate mothers because their daughters are stripping off old Barbie's clothes and trying to put them on curvy Barbie.

Velcro, a sewing machine and pre-ordering dolls and clothes on the Mattel website helps ease the pain, but tantrums can rattle even the most secure mom and dad. The company is setting up a help line just to deal with complaints and restore peace in families.

Mattel executives are hoping mothers and fathers will take time to introduce the new Barbie with guidance and wisdom. A 2006 study published in *Developmental Psychology* found that girls exposed to Barbie at a young age expressed greater concern with being thin compared with those exposed to other dolls. One study is enough for me to embrace curvy Barbie.

But the question lingers: Will girls embrace the curvy Barbie as much as the old favorite?

I hope so, because it's a step in the right direction to get girls viewing their

own bodies in a realistic and favorable manner rather than putting themselves in front of a false, fun-house mirror.

It was time for me to test my 6-year-old granddaughter, Claire, so I ordered the curvy "Fashionista" doll from the Mattel website with long black hair and blue highlights — it never hurts to have extra incentive. I also ordered a stunning Latina doll in a gold dress and a beautiful African-American doll.

I couldn't find an Asian Barbie doll on Mattel that I liked, but e-bay had just what I was looking for. My experiment is to see how Claire interacts with her new dolls. Will they enjoy the Barbie Dream House and the pink convertible with Ken? Will the old favorites be pushed aside? We'll see.

Mattel estimates that there are more than 100,000 active Barbie collectors, 90 percent of whom are women with an average age of 40. I suppose I will become part of that market, but Claire will learn that differences should be celebrated and she, of course, will come out the winner.

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