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“KGOY” — or *Kids Growing Older Younger*: The Message of Barbie and the Bratz

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Toys are a barometer of sorts for the culture. The toys marketed and given to the nation's children are moral and cultural markers of the age. The toys we give our own children are indicators of our own beliefs, expectations, and notions of childhood.

Marketers on both sides of the Atlantic are taking notice of a sales war between Barbie and the Bratz dolls. For those of you untainted by exposure to the controversy, Barbie is the venerable doll created by Ruth Handler in 1959. Barbie became an instant success, selling by the millions. Girls from the 1960s onward just had to have Barbie dolls, and the product line included other dolls (including her boyfriend, Ken) and paraphernalia ranging from a mobile home to Barbie's sports car. For generations of young girls, Barbie defined femininity and cool.

Then came the Bratz in 2001. The sexuality of Barbie was never subtle, but the Bratz dolls redefine in-your-face attitude. Now, the Bratz dolls and Barbie are battling for supremacy in doll sales.

The Sunday Times [London] reports that the “Battle of the Dolls” involves sexuality at its very center:

“The Bratz phenomenon caught Mattel off-guard, but it's a huge company and there's no way it's going to sit back and let its market share go,” said Greg Livingston, a retail analyst and co-author of The Great Tween Buying Machine.

“Bratz offer a sense of street fashion and design that it's hard for Barbie to get into, but it's not impossible. It'll be interesting to see in 2007 where Barbie goes.”

Barbie's admirers say her staying power will see off the threat from the doe-eyed Bratz dolls with “a passion for fashion” and that Bratz is a prime example of a throw-away culture that creates crazes for toys — think Buzz Lightyear — that are quickly forgotten.

A lot of mothers hate the Bratz dolls, thinking they look like tarts — clearly unsuitable for small children. Some complain that the dolls appear sexual — “like pole dancers on their way to a gentleman's club”, as one American commentator put it — and that they belong to the same corrupting trend that has brought thongs to the children's sections of department stores.

What about Barbie? Are parents aware of her shady background and intentional sexuality? Revhan Harmanci of the San Francisco Chronicle provides background:

Barbie was created by Ruth Handler in 1959 and modeled on a German doll originally created as a sexual toy for men. Barbie's physiologically impossible figure (which underwent a slight redesign in 1997) would not be able to stand if made human-size. She cooed “Math is Hard” in 1992 and ran for president in 2004. She has been made in the image of different races, given several careers and been produced in “international” editions — 2006 saw the debut of the “Festivals of the World” series, with Kwanzaa and Carnavale Barbies, as well as Baby Doctor



Barbie and Zoologist Barbie. But Mattel has never strayed too far from the original concept.



But something has changed about Barbie's audience: It is collectively younger. When it debuted, the most popular kind of doll for girls were baby dolls — drink-and-wet dolls with names like Tiny Tears and Baby Toodles, according to doll-collecting Web sites.

Handler's great insight was to see that from the way girls played with paper dolls, there was a market for a doll that looked more like a grown-up, one who was pretty and fashionable. Barbie's original target audience was 9- to 12-year-olds.

Today, the idea of 12-year-olds playing with Barbie dolls seems ridiculous. The "tween" market has exploded in recent years — to the point where designer Marc Jacobs is taking 12-year-old actress Dakota Fanning as the face of his spring 2007 clothing line. Chuck Scothon, president of Mattel's Barbie division, emphasizes the multiple incarnations of the brand — "I always say, there's a Barbie girl for every age" — but says that "Barbie toy strength is cornerstone for ages 3 to 7."

Get that? Barbie is now targeted to a market of girls ages 3 to 7. Her overt sexuality is now for the preschool set.

The marketing philosophy behind this is made clear by the acronym "KGOY" — for "kids getting older younger." This is a bit of information that should have every parent's immediate attention. *The Sunday Times* explains further:

The range of Bratz products, from a hair paint stencil kit to cutesy Bratz "babyz" (tiny tots with their own ponyz) are part of a marketing drive targeting "tweenagers" — the eight to 12-year-olds who are now acknowledged as a consumer group. Although they have little money they do have huge "pester power". If the marketing and the peer pressure are strong enough, these girls can persuade their parents to buy the products.

The Bratz phenomenon is also part of what marketing men call KGOY, "kids getting older younger". Twenty years ago nobody would have thought of marketing sexy dolls to eight-year-olds; today it is not uncommon for an eight-year-old to own lip gloss and there have recently been rows about shops stocking bras with "Little Miss Naughty" written across them and 11-year-olds being banned from wearing thongs to school.

Kay Hymowitz of the Manhattan Institute, author of *Ready or Not: What Happens When We Treat Children as Young Adults*, sees the problem in the fact that marketers are going right to the kids — and around parents.

"Barbie was one of the first times that marketers said we don't have to care what the parents think," Hymowitz says, "I mean, Barbie was based on a cartoon prostitute. When Ruth Handler first started to market it, parents hated it, kids loved it.

"What marketers know and what parents forget, is that kids want to grow up fast."

Keep all this in mind as you think of the toys we give our kids. "KGOY" — a truly frightening concept, but one that helps to explain the world around us. What we need urgently is "PDDN" — "Parents Developing Discernment Now." What doll — and message — lies under *your* Christmas tree?

We discussed this issue on Tuesday's edition of *The Albert Mohler Program* [listen [here](#)]. My special guest was Kay Hymowitz. We will schedule her again soon to talk about her new book, *Marriage and Caste in America — Separate and Unequal Families in a Post-Marital Age*.

