

TALKING TOYS SPEAK VOLUMES ABOUT GENDER STEREOTYPES

David Staples

For those who blather about feminists having no sense of humor, I offer the Barbie Liberation Organization.

The BLO is waging a witty, sneaky, and subversive campaign. I wish I had thought it up.

The BLO has 150 members: feminists, anti-war activists, business people, lawyers. The common thread is most of them are parents.

The group is based in New York. There are six operatives in Canada, two in Western Canada.

The group's plan is simple: buy Teen Talk Barbie and Talking G.I. Joe dolls, then switch the voice boxes. The altered dolls are then placed back on store shelves and resold to unsuspecting kids.

In the end, blonde, curvaceous Barbie has an evil laugh and makes machine gun noises. She says things like: Eat Lead, Cobra!; Attack!; No escape for the guilty!; Vengeance is mine!; Dead men tell no tales! Meanwhile, muscle-bound G.I. Joe says: Will we ever have enough clothes?; I love to shop with you; Let's plan my dream wedding; Ken's such a dream.

"Our methods are clearly tongue in cheek, but our message is not," says a BLO spokesman, who goes by the code name of G.I. Joe.

"Our message is that these dolls perpetuate gender-based stereotypes. And we think that is tied into some greater societal problems, especially a thing like G.I. Joe, which encourages kids to act in a violent way.

"A lot of people really don't think about what these toys are saying unless it appears to them in a way they're not expecting it."

Joe says the BLO launched its campaign last August [1993]. It was pushed to act after the brouhaha over Teen Talk Barbie saying, "Math is hard."

After purchasing the dolls, operatives send them to group headquarters in New York City, spokesman Joe says.

"Corrective surgery" is then performed on the doll. Using a screwdriver, Barbie is split in half. G.I. Joe has to be cut in half by a small saw. The circuits are removed from the chest, then switched.

Plastic surgery must be done to make the dolls appear untouched. The entire operation takes between three and six hours, Joe says. So far 330 dolls have been reprogrammed.

The doll makers, Mattel and Hasbro, have said the group is wasting its time, but hasn't threatened legal action, Joe says.

Most kids are pleased with their altered dolls and don't return them to the stores. "We think we're actually delivering a superior product," Joe says. "It's actually an educational product in ways that the old product wasn't. It will bring attention to this idea of gender-stereotyping."

Since my wife Gillian and I had a baby boy, Jack, last April, I've been thinking more and more about gender stereotyping. Some people say no matter what you do, testosterone-filled boys will be rambunctious and loud, while testosterone-free girls will be sweet. I'm not so sure. My son is loud and rambunctious, but he's also sweet.

Do my wife and I encourage loud and rambunctious behavior? If we have a little girl some day will we treat her the same? Are we afraid of Jack being too sweet? Would we ever dress him in pink? Are we just a bit too glad that he's a great, big boy for his age and that he likes to hoot and holler and pound the floor like a madman, rollicking in his jolly jumper?

And is any of this worth getting worked up about? I don't have the answers. But the use of BLO's clever campaign is it didn't get my back up, it got me thinking.

The BLO could have done something stupid and criminal, like break into a toy store, trash the place and splash red paint on all of the Barbies. It could have shouted slogans and declared all men are brutish Rambos. What I like is the nonviolence, subtlety and humor of the BLO's clever campaign.

I'm also happy to report there have been few casualties during the doll surgery.

"We've only lost one patient," Joe says. "The Barbie sustained a broken neck."

1. In your journal, record your thoughts and feelings in response to the article. Then, write in response to one of the following topics:
 - What were some of your favourite toys when you were a child? To what extent did these toys influence your development as a boy or a girl?
 - What is your feeling about Barbie or G.I. Joe dolls? Do you feel they serve a useful purpose, or are they harmful to child development?Share your responses with a partner who did the same topic.
2. In a paragraph, summarize the beliefs of the BLO and the actions the group takes. Then, state whether you consider these actions positive or negative, and give your reasons.
3. Debate whether or not the issue raised by the BLO really matters.
4. Why does Staples enjoy the approach of the BLO campaign? Find two examples of the BLO's use of humour.
5. In the role of a child or parent who bought a reprogrammed Barbie or G.I. Joe doll, write a letter to the BLO.
6. Suppose you have a child. How would you raise your daughter or son with respect to the issue of gender-stereotypes and toys? Would it be possible or desirable to raise a child in a non-sexist way? Discuss.

DO WE NEED PRO SPORTS?

Bill Falla

"... Thank you, Dirk, and here is the sports news. Baseball was supposed to begin spring training today, but the players association remains on strike, and chances for a 1995 season seem bleak. The National Hockey League lockout continues, and there are still no new talks scheduled.

"Over in the NBA, the players association has announced it will strike during the playoffs if owners don't agree to remove the salary cap from the next collective bargaining agreement. And finally, in the NFL, players angry about the paycuts forced by that league's salary cap have ousted union president Gene Upshaw. The new leader says that when camps open this summer, his members may not report.

"And that's the world of sports. Back to you, Dirk..."

We'd live, of course. We've gotten by just fine without major-league baseball. Summer didn't come to an end when baseball did, and fall arrived right on time without pennant races. The world will still turn without the World Series.

We could do without hockey, too, if we had to. And we may have to. Nor would Western civilization crumble in the unlikely event that pro basketball and pro football chose to disappear down the same sink-hole.

Sociologists and economists say we would rent more movies, and go out to dinner a little more often, and read more, and talk to our families, and get up off the couch to play ball ourselves. None of which would hurt.

But how badly would we miss pro sports if the entire \$5 billion or \$25 billion or \$47 billion (depending on whose guesstimates you prefer) enterprise toppled over and broke into a trillion sharp pieces of greed? Would life be significantly different—be somehow diminished—if we had to pass the time without all our pastimes?

Think the unthinkable: No Ken Griffey Jr. launching majestic home runs into the upper deck. No Mark Messier hoisting the Stanley Cup. No more games on the tube. No sports pages.

"We'd get by, but it would be a bleaker landscape," says David Halberstam, a political historian who has written several books on baseball, most recently, *October, 1964*. "People would have a lot less to look forward to."