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Playing with Barbie 'risks future eating disorders'

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Playing with a Barbie as a child just once can increase the risk of developing an eating disorder, a study claims.

A total of 76 girls aged five to eight were monitored playing with toys from the Barbie range, a more realistic childlike doll or a plastic car. Before and after sessions in two different periods of study, they were asked by researchers about their perceived body size compared to what they thought an ideal body looked like.

Even brief periods of time spent playing with a Barbie reduced the girls' own ideal body size and their perception of what an "ideal adult" should look like.

Their ideas of ideal body sizes did not increase after they then went on to play with more realistically sized dolls, including one that was modelled on Dora the Explorer.

A Barbie doll is projected to have a body mass index of 16.2. In the UK, a person with a BMI below 18.5 is considered to be underweight.

Long-term consequences of body dissatisfaction and unrealistic "thin-ideals" can include the development of eating disorders, poor dietary habits and depression.

"These studies show an effect of playing with ultra-thin fashion dolls on girls' own body ideal," wrote the authors.

"Not only were we able to replicate the negative impact of thin dolls on girls' body image, but we also demonstrated that these impacts cannot be immediately countered through play with realistic childlike dolls, nor washed out following play with a control toy [cars]."

Playing with such toys also presents a "significant potential risk" to the self-esteem of girls, they added.

"Body dissatisfaction is a huge problem, particularly among young girls," said Professor Lynda Boothroyd, lead author and a psychologist at Durham University. "It can have serious consequences for girls' well-being and lead to eating disorders and depression." Parents concerned about the impact of ultra-thin dolls can mitigate this by only providing more realistic toys, said the authors.

The Dora the Explorer figure and a realistically sized Lottie doll were not found to have had any negative effects on children's body image or ideals.

Since they first hit supermarket shelves in 1959, more than one billion Barbies have been sold worldwide. In 2016, a new Barbie range was launched, including three optional body shapes and seven skin tones.

Manufacturers Mattel said that the updated dolls were designed to appeal to "millennial mums" and ideas of "social justice".

Eating disorders are estimated to affect more than 1.6 million people in the UK, and anorexia has the highest mortality rate of any disorder experienced by teenagers.