



DOLLS ARE US

Recently, there have been several news stories about consumers demanding, and toy companies creating, more diverse representations of dolls for children. This includes more dolls of color, dolls with disabilities, and dolls with different body types as well as other physical characteristics like eye color, hair texture and skin complexion. Dolls are one of the first and most common toys for children. They provide a great deal of playing and learning potential including learning about self, dramatic play, putting clothes on and off, feeding, talking, language development and nurturing. Because they also provide a reflection of who children are, dolls should include the diversity that is reflected in our society.

This lesson provides an opportunity for students to explore their own identity and the physical characteristics that make each person unique, learn about some of the new diverse representation of dolls, reflect on their own experiences with dolls and propose a new doll by making one and writing a persuasive letter to a toy company.

See these additional ADL resources: *Current Events Classroom* lessons "[Role Models and Stereotypes: Misty Copeland's Story](#)," and "[Toys and Gender](#)," [Why Is It Important to Teach Young Children to Appreciate Diversity?](#) and [Should I Initiate Conversations about Differences?](#)

Grade Level: grades 2–5

Time: 45–60 minutes

Common Core Anchor Standards: Writing, Speaking and Listening

Learning Objectives:

- Students will explore the physical aspects of their appearance.
- Students will learn about the recent stories in the news about more diverse representation of dolls (race/ethnicity, disabilities and body shape).
- Students will reflect on what's missing in terms of diverse dolls and will create dolls that fill that void.
- Students will compose a persuasive letter to a toy company about the need for diverse dolls.

Material:

- Plain white construction paper and markers
- Materials for making paper dolls: paper, crayons/markers (include markers/crayons with a variety of skin tones) and other art supplies (paint, tape, buttons, yarn in realistic hair colors, glue, pipe cleaners, etc.)
- [Pictures of Dolls](#) (to be posted around the room)
- [Persuasive Letter Graphic Organizer](#) (one for each student)

Vocabulary:

Review the following vocabulary words and make sure students know their meanings. (See ADL's "[Glossary of Education Terms](#)" and "[Definitions Related to Bias, Injustice and Bullying--Elementary Age.](#)")

- adopted
- curvy
- identity
- representation
- body shape
- disability
- petite
- unique
- campaign
- diverse
- physical characteristics
- walking aid
- complexion
- hearing aid
- race
- wheelchair

SELF PORTRAITS AND DOLLS

1. Ask students: *What are some of the physical characteristics we use to describe people?* Briefly take a few suggestions (such as skin color, hair length, height, etc.). Have students turn and talk with a person sitting next to them. Tell them you are going to give them three minutes (longer for younger students) to write down as many physical feature categories they can think of to describe a person. Have one person record the pair's responses.

NOTE: If students suggest specific features such as "bald" or "curly hair," explain that they should come up with the general category of "hair texture" rather than the specific adjectives.

2. Come back together as a whole class and create a list on the board of all the characteristics students came up with in their pairs. Do this by asking one pair at a time to share something on their list, then go to the next pair, having them share something on their list that hasn't been said yet (i.e. tell students not to repeat). Continue eliciting one answer from each pair until all their responses are shared. Create a list like below and add any of the following words/phrases that the students do not mention.

- Hair color
- Body shape
- Nose shape
- Hair texture
- Ear shape
- Mouth shape/size
- Height
- Eye shape
- Braces, glasses, hearing aids
- Skin color and complexion
- Eye color
- Crutches, cast, wheelchair, etc.
- Eyebrows and eyelashes
- Other distinguishing characteristics (birthmarks, freckles, etc.)

3. Have students reflect on the characteristics above and write a short list of physical features that describe themselves. If time permits, you can distribute drawing material and have students draw self-portraits that include some of these specific details. Stress that the quality of the drawing is not what is important; what's important is highlighting what makes each person unique.
4. Ask some students to share their list of characteristics and/or drawings with the class and then engage students in a class discussion by asking:
 - In what ways are the descriptions different and in what ways are they similar?
 - What does it mean to be unique?
 - Physical characteristics are one part of a person's identity. What are some other things that make up a person's identity?

Then have students think about dolls they either play with now, played with when they were younger, or dolls that their siblings or friends played with. Ask:

- When you play(ed) with dolls or saw others playing with dolls, what did they look like?
- In what ways did the dolls look like you?
- In what ways did the dolls not look like you?
- Is this important?

INFORMATION SHARING

1. Ask students: *Has anyone heard about dolls being in the news lately?*
2. Share the following information with students about the recent news stories about diverse dolls.
 - Mattel, the toy company, recently announced the addition of Barbie dolls that come in three body shapes: petite, curvy and tall. In addition, Barbie dolls now come in seven different skin tones; 30 hair colors (including blue), and 24 hairstyles and textures. Mattel says that they are doing this to "more closely reflect their young owners' world."
 - A toymaker in England named Makies has released a line of dolls with disabilities. They were inspired by a social media campaign called Toys Like Me. The campaign encouraged parents of children with various disabilities to customize their toys, making them look more like real people. The results were then posted online. Following the success of the Toys Like Me campaign, Makies released a new line of dolls, giving it the same name. The company created items like hearing aids, walking aids and facial birthmarks for the dolls.
 - A toy company called Malaville, started by international model Mala Bryan, created dolls that come in different shades of brown with a variety of hair curls, coils and textures. They also wear African- and Caribbean-inspired outfits. Mala Bryan said about the dolls: "I believe that diverse representation is extremely important because children tend to associate their dolls with their playmate."
 - Two adopted African American sisters, Patience and Jocelyn Dingle, who love to play with dolls, wrote a letter to Mattel asking if they could make more dolls that look like them. Said their mother, "Patience will ask why no one looks like her."
3. Engage students in a discussion by asking:
 - What is happening here?
 - Why do you think these dolls are being made?
 - What do you think Patience's mother (from story above) means when she says "Patience will ask why no one looks like her."
4. Post the *Pictures of Dolls* around the room (or tape each one to a group cluster of desks, if that's how your room is organized). Explain to students that some of these are real dolls created by toy companies and some are homemade dolls made by parents. Give students 5–7 minutes to walk around the room and look at the pictures of the dolls and have them jot down notes on a piece of paper of anything they want to remember.
5. After viewing the pictures, engage students in a discussion by asking:
 - What did you notice about the dolls? What physical characteristics did they have?

- Why do you think there is a need for more diverse dolls?
- How do you think a child with a disability (or a child who has dark skin or curly hair) might feel seeing these dolls?
- Are there other things in your life that could be more diverse than they currently are (TV shows, games, books, cartoons, movies, etc.)? How so?
- If you could make a new doll that includes some aspect of diversity, what would you make?

MAKING DOLLS

1. Reflecting on everything that has been discussed so far, have students envision a new kind of doll that either reflects parts of themselves that they currently don't see in dolls or another aspect of diversity that isn't reflected in dolls today as much as it should be. Briefly brainstorm ideas for the dolls.

NOTE: If you have students who say they do not like or play with dolls and may be reluctant to design a doll, suggest that they put themselves in the position of being a toymaker who needs to create a diverse doll or use the term "action figure" instead of doll.

2. Distribute construction paper, drawing materials and other art supplies. Give students 15 minutes to make the doll and if more time is needed, they can complete the next day or for homework. Give students the options of working alone, in pairs or in small groups of three.
3. Engage students in a class discussion by asking:
 - How did you come up with your idea for your dolls?
 - Who did you make your doll for, if anyone?
 - How did it feel to make a doll that represented an aspect of diversity?
 - How would you convince a toy company to create a doll like yours?

WRITING ACTIVITY: PERSUASIVE LETTER (INCLUDING SOME AS HOMEWORK ASSIGNMENT)

1. Have students write a persuasive letter to a toy company that advocates for the company to create a doll or toy that includes an aspect of diversity that is missing or isn't as common. Use the [Persuasive Letter Graphic Organizer](#) to get students to begin sketching out their letter. They can either write their letter based on the doll they created (in which case they should include a photograph of the doll) or a new idea for a doll or toy.
2. Using the graphic organizer, have students consider their reasons and "evidence" to persuade the toy company to create their ideas for dolls. Give students 15 minutes to begin the letter by completing the graphic organizer and starting to write. They can complete the first draft for homework.
3. Spend the next several sessions in class having students develop and strengthen their writing by revising, conferencing, editing and rewriting their letters to completion.

CLOSING

Have students share their dolls and their letters aloud with the rest of the class. If possible, invite parents, guardians and family members in to learn about the students' doll ideas.

ADDITIONAL READING

- [“11 Empowering Dolls That Help Little Girls See The Beauty In Themselves”](#) (*The Huffington Post*, January 28, 2016)
- [“Barbie Just Got A Major Makeover For The First Time”](#) (MTV News, January 28, 2016)
- [Company Creates Special Dolls With Disabilities and They Are Changing the Toy Industry](#) (Winkgo)
- [“N.C. Adoptive Sisters Call for More Diverse Dolls”](#) (ABC News, December 30, 2015)
- [Stereotypes and the Clark Doll Test](#) (Explorable.com)
- [Toys Like Me](#) (Facebook)
- [“The Afro-Caribbean-Inspired Dolls That Should've Existed A Long Time Ago”](#) (*The Huffington Post*, January 13, 2016)
- [The world's first line of dolls with disabilities has already flown off the shelves](#) (Bright Side)
- [“This Model Is Making Black Dolls With Natural Hair to Make Point About Diversity”](#) (.Mic, January 7, 2016)

COMMON CORE ANCHOR STANDARDS

Content Area/Standard
Writing
Standard 1: Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.
Standard 5: Develop and strengthen writing as needed by planning, revising, editing, rewriting, or trying a new approach.
Speaking and Listening
Standard 1: Prepare for and participate in a large of conversations and collaborations with diverse partners, building on others' ideas and expressing their own clearly and persuasively.
Standard 2: Integrate and evaluate information presented in diverse media and formats, including visually, quantitatively and orally.

PICTURES OF DOLLS



[Facebook / Toys Like Me](#)



[Facebook / Toys Like Me](#)



[Facebook](#) / Toys Like Me



[Facebook / Toys Like Me](#)



[Facebook](#) / Mala Bryan



[Facebook](#) / Toys Like Me

PERSUASIVE LETTER GRAPHIC ORGANIZER

Student Name: _____

Person/Company Letter Is Sent to:

Statement of What I Want More of in Dolls:

Reason #1:	Facts, Quotes and Examples:
Reason #2	Facts, Quotes and Examples:
Reason #3	Facts, Quotes and Examples:

Summary/Final Statement and Request: