

Latest study results show doll play encourages emotional understanding

<https://toyworldmag.co.uk/latest-study-results-show-doll-play-encourages-emotional-understanding/>

Published on: 8th February 2022

The multi-year study conducted by researchers at Cardiff University has found that playing with dolls such as Barbie offers kids a raft of developmental benefits.

<https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/desc.13163>

Mattel's Barbie brand and a team of neuroscientists at Cardiff University have released the latest findings from a multi-year study exploring the short and long-term developmental impacts of doll play. In the study's second year, researchers investigated the importance of what kids say while they play. The latest research found children talked more about others' thoughts and emotions, a concept known as internal state language (ISL), when playing with dolls than while playing tablet games, allowing kids to practise [sic] real-world social skills.

"When children create imaginary worlds and role play with dolls, they communicate at first out loud and then internalise [sic] the message about others' thoughts, emotions and feelings," said researcher Dr. Sarah Gerson. "This can have positive long-lasting effects on children, such as driving higher rates of social and emotional processing and building social skills like empathy that can become internalised [sic] to build and form lifelong habits."

During observation, researchers saw increased brain activity in the posterior superior temporal sulcus region when kids spoke as though their dolls had thoughts and feelings, further supporting Year 1 findings that even when children play by themselves with dolls, it can help build vital social skills like empathy.

The study used state-of-the-art functional, near-infrared spectroscopy equipment to explore activation of the brain while children played with dolls and on tablets, both by themselves and with another person. The researchers found playing with dolls prompted more ISL about others than playing with tablet games, and using ISL about others was related to increased pSTS activation.

The research also suggests that these findings are gender agnostic, revealing the comprehensive critical importance of doll play in practicing social skills.

"We're proud that when children play out stories with Barbie and vocalize their thoughts and emotions, they may be building crucial social skills, like empathy, that give them the tools needed to be confident, inclusive adults," said Lisa McKnight, senior vice president and global head of Barbie and Dolls, Mattel. "As leaders in the dolls category, we look forward to uncovering even more benefits of doll play, grounded in neuroscience, through our long-term partnership with Cardiff University."

The results of this second year of research, titled 'Doll play prompts social thinking and social talking: Representations of internal state language in the brain', were published in *Developmental Science* in 2021 by Dr. Sarah Gerson and colleagues at Cardiff University's Centre for Human Developmental Science, UK, as well as colleagues at King's College London. The multi-year research effort explores the short-term and long-term developmental impacts of doll play, with new stages of research and results being conducted through 2024. Parents and caregivers can visit [Barbie.com/Benefits](https://www.barbie.com/benefits) to learn more about the research and access resources.