

Why Is This Doll More Important Than Barbie?



At first glance, the newest plush toys at Vat19 might not seem particularly special. Yes, they're adorable stuffed puppies, but they lack the ready-made virality of an on-trend toy or the innovation of a tech-forward gift. Yet, one could argue that these stuffed animals are more important than the most iconic brand in toy history.

To find out why, let's go down a rabbit hole of the surprising history of inclusive toys.

Although mass-produced toys have been around since the 1800s, the first toy with a visible disability didn't hit the market until 1971. And you might be surprised to learn which line made that inclusive step.



Mike Power, a member of G.I. Joe's Adventure Team, became the first toy with that distinction. Nicknamed "The Atomic Man", the action figure featured two prosthetics styled like robotic limbs that, of course, had that signature kung-fu grip.

Despite the relative popularity of the Mike Power action figure, it would be another 15 years before the next major disabled toy appeared on store shelves. That's when Mattel debuted Hal's Pals, which were similar to Cabbage Patch Dolls in many ways—and different in a very important one.



Named after Hal O'Leary, a ski instructor dedicated to teaching children with disabilities, each doll included a different accessibility aid: a wheelchair, leg braces and crutches, a mobility cane, and more.

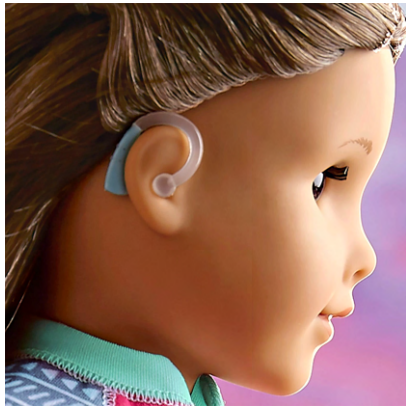
Although this doll was important within the disabled community, the concept of inclusive toys still hadn't penetrated the mainstream. That wouldn't happen until Barbie entered the space a decade later.

And it ended in disaster.



In 1997, Barbie introduced Share-a-Smile Becky, Barbie's first-ever friend to use a wheelchair. While this was considered a major step forward and a significant milestone for representation, Becky was eventually cast aside for a predictable reason.

Children quickly discovered that Becky's wheelchair couldn't fit through the door of Barbie's Dream House. It couldn't even fit in the elevator! The frustration with the toy was amplified because it was a microcosm of the accessibility issues plaguing the country. Soon after, Becky was discontinued.



To their credit, Mattel has since launched many representative dolls in the Barbie line. And the toy landscape as a whole now features a wide variety of inclusive options. But there's still one area that's lacking.

While there are a plethora of inclusive dolls and action figures, there are surprisingly few disabled plush toys on the market. That's where these guys come in.



Power Puppies are huggable little doggos with visible disabilities. Created by toy company Uncute, these guys are named “Power Puppies” as a reminder that disabilities don’t stop you from being strong and capable.

Our society has made crucial advancements in disability rights over the last half-century, and that progress can be seen in the gifts we make for our children. We’ve learned that providing a child a reflection of themselves is one of the most important things a toy can do.