

She calls her doll "Beak."

Beak came to her from a cousin who never played baby dolls alone or with someone. So, tossing away the duties of a baby doll mommy, she gifted this eight-inch vinyl and cloth doll to her little cousin. Beak is the first of four dolls her cousin would be gifted to feed, clothe and cuddle. Apparently, it was task not wanted.

Her four baby dolls would lie in different positions on her bedroom floor. She, at the time a busy four-year-old, unfolds her energy into a bin of tiny Lego pieces. This little gal has seldom caressed, held and talked to her baby dolls; giving only one a name: Beak. No one knows the reason for the name. Mommy asks. Grandma asks. "Her name is Beak," responds the then four-year-old new mommy of a baby doll. Even eight years later this now Dressage rider shrugs, "Her name is Beak." She is the only doll propped up on the dresser in the bedroom. The doll remains in the family, a gift of the cousin now in high school, to a four-year-old, now in middle school.

These baby dolls were not often held and hugged. Always left undressed, they occasionally were wrapped up in a doll quilt somehow becoming unwrapped. Do youngsters need to learn to care and to love through a toy?

A younger cousin likes "stuffies" but not dolls. "I don't play with baby dolls," says this then five-year-old girl. She shakes her head as if playing with dolls is a no-no. She tolerates playing with Legos. Then this third grade gal hugs and feeds her two cats.

The boy cousins put their love into the tiny cars manipulating them into car crashes, fabricated races. The boys love building structures with plastic snap together.

In the 1950's, my brothers played with inch size farm animals, using wooden building blocks to fence in the animals. My sisters and I played with our baby dolls who wet themselves after feeding them water from a toy bottle. We had no stuffed animals (stuffies) to hug.

So, where are all the new parents learning the art of caring for babies if they do not play-act parenthood? Perhaps, the real live critters, cats, dogs, and horses are taking the place of inert dolls. Love can be transferred into the cousins from the cats and dogs in their lives. Pictures of the two cats in each of their homes are sent to the grandparents. So, love is shared. Cats and dogs reciprocate love by curling up on grandchildren's laps and by chasing balls thrown by a child. Maybe this is even better than playing mommy or daddy to a manufactured toy.

Dolls are purchased every day, especially during the Christmas seasons. Often grown mommies want the dolls for themselves. "I like this one," a neighbor mommy told me. "My daughter wants a different one, but she will grow to like this one".

The then 12-year-old daughter shrugs. She is now a twenty-something mommy for two sons. Do dolls matter?

Beak might know. She isn't talking.

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