

# Make Room for More Dollhouses

*Once thought of as a category exclusively for little girls and collectors, today's dollhouses are breaking down the walls that once separated them from boys, older children, and multicultural families. As competition rises, dollhouses are getting hipper, more interactive and less expensive than ever before.*

by Kari Anderson

"Cambridge Hospital is my biggest customer for dollhouses," says retailer Stella Downie, owner of Stellabella Toys in Cambridge, Massachusetts. "Dollhouses are often used in therapeutic settings with children who have suffered from abuse or even as a way to teach problem-solving." Toys used in play therapy can help children express themselves when words are inadequate.

"I've found that therapists, educators and parents usually like to choose their own accessories instead of opting for pre-packaged sets. By choosing things a la carte, they're able to create their own doll families rather than having to use the blonde, Caucasian dolls that often come in the sets. On the other

hand, grandparents purchasing a dollhouse as a gift often prefer an all-in-one package because it's more convenient for them."

Stella has seen competition in this category swell, which has helped bring prices down. "Our store used to sell dollhouses without any furnishings for \$250, but that business has stopped for me," she explains. "People don't want to spend that anymore when they can get a nice house for \$60 to \$90."

More choices in dollhouses also means more competition for her shelf space, and Stella must be judicious about what she brings in. "I tell my customers that they can mix and match furnishings from different lines. Occasionally I'll have a customer who wants to buy only one brand, but I think that even though the packages match, the furniture from one line to another is often interchangeable. This is helpful when I'm trying out a new line to



*Dollhouses that incorporate a child's art can change daily to reflect a his or her current interests. (Storyboard Toys)*

see how it does: I can bring in a house from a new manufacturer and fill it with the furniture that I already sell. Ordering all the furnishings for every house would be overwhelming!”

Stella keeps several fully furnished dollhouses on display at all times, and she’s careful where she puts them. Because she’s learned that putting them on the floor will result in excessive wear and tear, she now keeps them at adult eye level. “I’d like to have more demos to show people,” she says. “I used to be able to get display dollhouses in which all the pieces were glued down. I really liked that, but no one offers that anymore.”

### Trendy versus traditional

While carrying an unlimited number of accessories may not be possible for a retailer, a wide range of unique accessories is an important feature to look for in a dollhouse line. “The accessory business has spawned into two directions: ultra-modern and classical,” says Michael Heun, product manager for BRIO Toys. “The ultra-modern format includes trendy accessories that reflect today’s culture, such as flat-screen TVs and computer desks. There is also a large contingent that still looks for classical accessory sets, which are more traditional in design and style. How many accessory packs go with the home concept a consumer likes is important since classical accessories

don’t go so well with contemporary-style homes and vice versa.”

Detailed accessories become more important as a child gets older, while younger children do better with simpler, larger furniture pieces. “Smaller accessories and room sets become more relevant as a child matures,” notes Michael. “The older a child becomes, the quicker they are to make observations about lifestyles and culture and want that replicated in their play environments.”

### Make-your-own house

Curtis Jacobson, founder of Storyboard Toys, believes that the key to a dollhouse’s appeal to a wide range of children, both in terms of age and gender, lies in incorporating different play patterns. “Our market research has shown us that parents are reluctant to buy more expensive dollhouses for fear they’ll quickly be outgrown, but a dollhouse that can offer multiple play patterns will keep a child engaged longer. For example, if parts of the house or its furnishing can be created and recreated by the child, then the house can change to reflect their interests. They can essentially play in a different house every day.”

Curtis designed ArtHouse with this in mind and came up with a structure that would incorporate a child’s artwork into the framework of the house. A child

*As dollhouse furniture evolves to reflect modern lifestyles, modern furnishings like flatscreen TVs, computers and treadmills are moving in. (BRIO Toys)*





can draw, color and insert his artwork into the wall structure, creating a room of his own design. "Boys view it as a construction toy," he notes.

Other features that are valuable for any dollhouse include portability and ease of assembly. "A dollhouse that can be disassembled is easy to store or take on a trip," continues Curtis. "Also, a roof that lifts off or walls that can be removed adds to a house's accessibility, and allows kids to play with it from the top or any side."

Dollhouses can be marketed to schools, afterschool programs or homeschoolers, he points out. "It provides a great group project, and when the children are part of the design process, they can contribute at their own level, even when ages or skills are diverse."



*Above: Detailed furnishings, such as the toothbrush, bar of soap and loofah shown here, make a dollhouse more realistic and aid roleplaying. (International Playthings)*

*Left: The proliferation of castles, firehouses, tree houses, clubhouses, and pirate ships all give evidence to the fact that boys like to roleplay with "dollhouses," too. (Small World Toys)*

## A dollhouse evolution

Sue Tice, product manager for International Playthings, agrees that today's dollhouses are more interactive than those of the past. "We have a website where consumers can print wallpaper patterns or find simple instructions to make different kinds of curtains and rugs for their dollhouses. Some of our sets even feature short stories that children can act out with the dolls as they play."

When selecting a dollhouse for a young child, Sue recommends that the space inside the house be taken into consideration. "There should be enough room for active play – even as your child grows," she says. "The ease of care and cleaning should also be considered. Durable plastic houses tend to make the job of cleaning up easier."

As for dollhouses for boys, Sue is seeing a growing demand although houses for girls still rule. "I think castles and other structures designed for boys tend to be received by a younger audience and, as a result, are not as detailed. I do believe there is a higher demand for this category than years ago, but I think consumers are willing to invest more in houses and accessories for girls since the play life is perceived to be longer."

"Age appropriateness and safety are key factors in



*Accessories can help extend the play value for a dollhouse, and the more detailed they are, the more they appeal to older children. (Galt America)*

children's dollhouses," states Felicia Riccardo, director of marketing for Small World Toys. "For 2- to 6-year-olds, pieces should be sturdy and chunky enough to allow little hands to manipulate the various objects and people. Dollhouses and accessories for 2-year-olds should be extra-durable, with no small parts."

Modernization is apparent in several facets of today's dollhouses, according to Felicia. Furnishings now include multi-media rooms, computer rooms and exercise equipment, and some houses are even equipped with lights and doorbells. "We are also finding that the changing makeup of today's families is creating a demand for additional doll-family members of other races, so we offer individual dolls of various ethnic varieties so children can customize their doll families," she explains.

A positive effect of the increased competition among dollhouse makers is the increase in innovation. "This category has gotten very competitive in recent years," Felicia notes. "Many newcomers are entering this field, some with great twists on the traditional. We've found that the consuming public likes their wooden dollhouses to be of lasting quality, and they are willing to pay for that."

## Looking ahead

Kevin McGrath, president of Galt America, says the added competition means more products are being developed for both boys and girls. "Dollhouses are no longer completely female-oriented. Companies are producing more products that are suitable for either gender, and that's great. Now there are schools, airports, and pirate ships – all of which stem from dollhouses."

He's also seeing more dollhouse products being developed specifically

for the specialty market. "These specialized products will continue to help distinguish specialty stores from mass merchants. I also think dollhouses and other system products will continue to increase their expansion possibilities."

One-stop shopping is a trend that Kevin says is very strong right now in dollhouses. "You still have situations where Grandma buys the house and different family members purchase the pieces to fill it, but many shoppers today are finding it more convenient to get the house and furnishings all in one package. Then they can expand on that with accessories, such as swing sets, vehicles or an addition to the house."

As for accessories, Kevin says the sky's the limit. "Anything that can be used for role playing is open to purchase, whether it be a garage, a playground, a second building, or even a second house. Whatever helps a child go deeper into role playing is a positive addition."



*In each issue of **edplay**, Kari Anderson reports on trends within specific prod-*

*uct categories. If you have tips you'd like to share, contact Kari at [kanderson@fwpi.com](mailto:kanderson@fwpi.com), or call 800-344-0559.*

