

The Cabbage Patch Phenomenon: more than just kids' stuff?

by Marsha Riben

No doubt, each of you by now has your favorite Cabbage Patch story. Did you hear about the toy store manager who armed himself with a baseball bat on Thanksgiving weekend when he put 150 dolls on sale? Did you hear the one about the radio station that was dropping the dolls into a field from a helicopter? Seems all you needed was a credit card and a catcher's mit!

And, no doubt, everyone has heard the most famous Cabbage Patch story of all ... the one most widely spread, and denied by Coleco Industries, that if you send them a defective doll they will replace it and send a death certificate for the first one.

Who is objecting to the Cabbage Patch idea?

Just funny, insignificant stories? There is an increasing number of people who think not.

One such group, Origins (a New Jersey organization for women who have lost children to adoption), joined Concerned United Birthparents (a New Hampshire-based national support and search group for birthparents) in issuing a formal and public protest of the "offensive marketing techniques employed by Coleco Industries, Inc., to promote the sale of their 'Cabbage Patch Kids.'"

The official statement of the group, presented by Mary Anne Cohen, Co-Founder of Origins, goes on to say: "We support the views of many adoption reform groups, as well as adoptive parents' organizations, who take personal offense at the insensitive exploitation of the adoptive situation."

Concerned United Birthparents (CUB) seems equally concerned with matters of sensitivity and exploitation. Their Outreach Leader, Gail Davenport, of North White Plains, said, "If any company were to introduce a black slave doll complete with transfer of property papers, we would see a public uproar because people are aware and sensitive to that issue. This is not the case with adoption ..."

In a small midwestern town, an adoption agency printed an announcement in a local newspaper that they would begin accepting applications on Monday morning from prospective adoptors after a three-year freeze. The lines began forming the preceeding Friday, with people camping out, and many coming from several states away.

In New Brunswick, NJ, a store advertised Cabbage Patch Kids for sale. The line began forming many

hours prior to opening, and people came from miles away. Some were physically injured in the melee.

What, if anything, is the connection between these two isolated events? Why are Cabbage Patch Kids being hailed as having created the biggest and most unexpected demand for a toy in this country? How do adoptees, birthparents and adoptive parents feel about the dolls and the clamor they have created? Why is Coleco being sued?

Why are they objecting?

While all objecting groups agree on their disapproval of the commercialization of a cabbage patch doll, their reasons for objecting to the adoption being done by Coleco seem to agree for different reasons.

Bob Criso, supervisor of the Adolescent Unit of Rutgers Community Mental Health Center, sees a disproportionate number of adoptees in therapy. Adoption, he says, "is a very loaded and sensitive issue for many people and we should make an effort to be aware and respect it. We should be cognizant of the cultural attitudes and values which we pass on to our children through what initially looks like just another harmless holiday fad."

Pamela Hasegawa, New Jersey State Coordinator of the Adoptees Liberty Movement Association (ALMA), objects to the implication that an adopted doll will make a child more caring. "Children who care for their dolls (or clothes, or other toys)," she says, "do not necessarily grow up to be caring parents; concomitantly, children who do not care for their dolls (or clothes or other toys) may grow up to be very caring parents. We cannot assume that signing a certificate of adoption will have an educational effect or increase a child's 'commitment' to that particular toy."

The American Academy of Child Psychiatry, in Washington, DC, wrote to Arnold Greenberg, President of Coleco, in November to

warn the company of the doll's potential hazard to adopted children's understanding of their origins. "The doll," writes the Academy, "arouses in children, especially adopted children, confusion, doubt and misunderstanding. They are receiving information contrary to information told by their parents, making the parents feel uncomfortable at best.

"The adoption 'gimmick' serves no worthwhile purpose in terms of recreation or education," continues the letter, "and the American Academy of Child Psychiatry hopes that you will withdraw the adoption aspect from its marketing. At the very least, it is not in good taste and is disturbing to many concerned with the health and happiness of children."

Cohen, of Origins, feels that the dolls insult birthmothers because: "the cabbage patch story totally negates their (the birthmothers') role in birthing and always loving the child they sacrificed."

Hasegawa, of ALMA, agrees. "Adoptees' most serious problem," she says, "is the anonymity of their ancestry. Grownups can deal with it and attempt a search, but kids can be damaged by thinking they come from cabbage patches."

Gloria Gruber of California, an attorney and adoptive mother, was so upset about the potential harm of Coleco's marketing strategy that she formed SPEAK - Society for the Protection of Adopted Kids. She is objecting, amongst other things, to the fact that the box states that the "children" are found in a cabbage patch.

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