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What's new in products, programs, and publications for parents

Karito Dolls: More than just a pretty face!

If you've spent any time in the doll aisle of the toy department in any discount store, you might wonder why so many dolls look as though they could represent members of "the oldest profession." We won't name names, but hey, doll-makers, that's not what the experts mean when they say it's healthy for children to engage in "fantasy play."

You can imagine our excitement when a regular reader of Family Forum alerted us to the debut of a beautiful, new doll that embodies a refreshing wholesomeness with a cutting edge sense of fashion, and it does so in five different ethnicities!

As if that weren't enough, this beautiful line of dolls also fosters global awareness and teaches the importance of charitable giving. It's kind of the doll version of what might happen if you crossed Mother Teresa with Angelina Jolie (leaving Brad Pitt out of the equation, of course).

Karito Kids is the brainchild of longtime friends Laura Rangel and Lisa Steen Proctor, who shared a dream of creating toys that do more than just momentarily entertain, but also introduce children to the concepts of global awareness, social responsibility, and charitable giving.

In 2005, they launched KidsGive LLC, whose mission is to develop toys, books, and other related products that raise global awareness among children, by teaching them about their peers around the world. "World-mindedness is critical to help our children connect with their peers and develop an appreciation for the beauty in diversity," says Rangel.

With that philosophy, the company's founders determined their ideal first product would be dolls that represent modern-day, 11-year-old girls from African, Asian, Caucasian, Latina and Mediterranean descents. They named the line Karito Kids, which means "charity and love of one's neighbor" in Esperanto (a constructed language formed to foster peace and international understanding). Standing 21 inches tall, the dolls' ethnically accurate features highlight the distinctive beauty of Lulu from Kenya, Wan Ling from China, Zoe from the United States, Gia from Italy, and Pita from Mexico.

Each doll comes with a beautiful, hardbound book of approximately 150 pages, featuring an exciting adventure/mystery taking place in the doll's country of origin. The stories combine fact with fiction and provide readers with clues that will later allow them to solve mysteries on the Karito Kids website.

From a purely parental/consumer standpoint, perhaps the most appealing aspect of this product is that for each Karito Kid and Karito Kids Adventure book sold, Karito Kids will donate 3 percent of the retail price to the worldwide children's charity Plan USA. Children themselves become actively involved in the donation process by entering a unique serial number found on each doll at www.KaritoKids.com and then personally selecting the charitable cause (growing up healthy, learning, habitat, or livelihood) where they want to make a difference. The kids can also add to their donations by playing games on the website and earning points (called "World Change"). These points are then converted into real donations that the kids can direct to their selected causes.

"I was so excited when my toy rep called and told me about this doll" says Nicole Hosking, co-owner/manager of Learning Express on Thomasville Road. "It really fit well with my values and the kinds of toys we try to offer at our store." According to Hosking, the doll is selling well, in spite of being on the market only a few months. "I've been surprised at how quickly they are selling since we haven't done any special advertising beyond word of mouth."

The starter set that includes doll, book, "Passport," and an outfit, sells for \$99.99. Books and outfits can be purchased separately. For more information, visit www.Karitokids.com. Locally, dolls are available at Learning Express in the Killlearn Shopping Center on Thomasville Road.