



# Black Dolls

## Discussion Guide

### Supporting Student Exploration of Black Dolls & Black American History

#### Introduction:

Understanding the history of Black dolls requires delving into the larger, complex narrative of Black Americans. This guide aids teachers in navigating this sensitive topic, emphasizing storytelling and the role of doll play in highlighting Black joy and resilience.

#### Pre-Exhibition Preparations:

- **Visiting the Strong:** Share with students that they will be visiting a very special exhibit at The Strong National Museum of Play. Share with them that they will be learning about the history of Black dolls and their role in telling the stories of Black Americans.
- **Introduce them to Black dolls.** Find images of Black dolls online and begin to spark conversations with your students related to their observations.
- **Contextualize the Topic:** Introduce students to the broader history of Black Americans. Highlight major achievements, cultural contributions, traditions, and practices.
- **Anticipate Questions:** Some students might have questions about racial discrimination, slavery, or modern-day racial issues. Be prepared to answer, but always ensure responses are age-appropriate. Try to answer these questions as authentically as possible while understanding that it is okay to do the research together as a learning community.
- **Answer students' questions in age-appropriate ways.** Some questions that young children might have are the following.
  1. **Question:** "Why do some people have different skin colors?"
    - **Response:** "Just like how flowers come in different colors, people have different skin colors too. It's one of the things that makes each of us unique and special."



# Black Dolls

## Discussion Guide

**2. Question:** “Did the Black people not like their skin color?”

• **Response:** “Black people love their skin color. The problem is that in the past and even today white people treated them unfairly because of it, and that wasn’t right.”

**3. Question:** “Were the Black dolls made because Black kids didn’t have dolls to play with?”

• **Response:** “Yes, Black dolls were special because they let Black kids have dolls that looked like them. It’s fun and important for kids to have toys that they can see themselves in.”

**4. Question:** “Why are we only going to see an exhibit about Black dolls and not all dolls?”

• **Response:** “This exhibit is special because it tells the story of Black dolls and what they meant to children and families. Just like how some exhibits focus on animals from the ocean or art from a particular place, this one is all about celebrating the history and beauty of Black dolls and Black people.”

**5. Question:** “Were these dolls special for some kids? Why?”

• **Response:** “Yes, they were very special. At times, it was hard for Black children to find dolls that looked like them. So, having a doll that they could see themselves in was very special and important. These dolls were made to represent and celebrate Black beauty and culture. Just like there are many types of dolls in the toy store, these dolls show another kind of beauty that every child can relate to.”

### **Exhibition Visit:**

• **Active Observation:** Encourage students to not just look but observe. Ask students what they notice about the dolls’ expressions, clothing, and design. Ask them to make connections between the dolls they learned about in their classrooms and the ones they are seeing in the exhibit.

• **Prompt Thought:** Ask questions such as “How do you think the child who played with this doll felt?”, or “What stories do you think this doll could tell if it could speak?”



# Black Dolls

## Discussion Guide

### Post-Exhibition Discussion Points:

- **Representation Matters:** Start by discussing the importance of representation. Why is it vital for people to see themselves in toys, movies, books, etc.?
- **The Power of Play: Discuss the role of dolls and toys in storytelling.** How does playing with dolls that look like us or share our culture influence how we feel about ourselves and our heritage?
- **Black Joy Amidst Adversity:** Explore the concept of resilience and finding joy even in tough times. How did Black families find ways to express joy, love, and pride through these dolls? Make a concerted effort to not oversimplify overcoming enslavement through doll play as that is not the story being told through the exhibit.
- **Personal Connections:** Ask students if they've ever felt particularly connected to a toy or story. Why did they feel that way?

### Interactive Activities for Further Engagement:

- **Story Crafting:** Encourage students to craft short stories about one of the dolls they saw. This allows them to think deeply about the doll's 'life' and 'experiences'.
- **Ignite global citizenship and social activism:** Encouraging students to think critically about the ways in which Black people have been marginalized. Discuss the concept of fairness and have students create signs, posters, or other visual representations to advocate for equity for all people.