

Payal Thomas

Co-founder of Every Girl Dolls

BY JENNIFER MARINO WALTERS



Why is it important for children to have a doll that looks like them?

It can make a child feel represented. Growing up, I felt so separated from my South Asian culture. My family moved around so much that we didn't have a strong community.

I was always the only Indian kid at school, so I never really connected with my culture. I realized that if I don't feel connected, how do I expect my children to? Now I'm trying to engage them with the culture, and Every Girl Dolls is one way to do that.

Were you surprised that it was so hard to find a South Asian doll for Kaila?

Yes! I thought I'd be able to easily find a doll that was brown and looked Indian or South Asian. But there weren't any. The majority of dolls are marketed to Caucasians or African Americans. A brown doll should be widely available. It shouldn't be something that's so special that I have to custom order it.

How did you link up with Snehal Patel?

I made a survey to get feedback from other parents about what they were looking for in a doll. I posted it in a group of South Asian women called Little Brown Diary. Snehal messaged me and said she had been thinking about creating a doll line and would love to work with me on it. It's been great! If I was doing this alone, I wouldn't have gotten this far. I needed a push. Snehal helps to keep me more accountable.

How did you design the doll?

We interviewed a couple of South Asian designers whom we found on Instagram. We found one we really liked, and she helped us design the doll. Then we found a manufacturer that makes 18-inch dolls. They're almost finished with the mold of

the face, and then we'll get a prototype that we can start sharing. The doll will be sold in a modern South Asian outfit, but it will be able to wear American outfits, too, because they're so widely available.

What will come after the initial South Asian doll?

We plan to put out Asian and Latina dolls next. I would also like the dolls to come with books that can further tie children to their culture.

How do you find time to get work done for the company?

I usually work on Every Girl Dolls two to three nights a week after the kids go to bed, between 8:30 p.m. and midnight. I wake up by 7:45 a.m. so I can be online for my day job at 8 a.m. I try to fit stuff in throughout the day. It's busy, but it's a good busy! I am working on stuff all the time, but it's not as hectic as it was in December, when I was doing research constantly.

What has been the hardest part about balancing it all?

I feel like it's very hard to be 100% present for anything. Sometimes when I'm working, I feel bad because I feel like I should be doing something with the kids.

What do you like about living in the Washington, D.C., area?

I love that there are so many activities for kids. I love all the parks, the rec centers and the trails. My family loves to go hiking, and we are always able to find new places to do that.

What do you hope your kids will learn from seeing you pursue this dream?

I hope they'll be inspired by seeing that I put myself out there and tried something new.

I hope it will open their eyes to understand that they can try anything too! ■

When Payal Thomas went doll shopping for her daughter last November, she couldn't find a doll of South Asian descent. Rather than paying \$200 to customize one, Thomas decided to start a doll company with another Indian American mother, Snehal Patel.

Every Girl Dolls, which officially launched in February, will offer dolls representing various ethnicities. The first, a doll representing South Asia, will likely be available by the end of this summer on the company's website, everygirldolls.com.

Launching a company with no entrepreneurial experience is challenging enough on its own. But Thomas also works full time for the IRS from her Burke, Virginia, home. Throw in a husband (Kevin), two kids (Jace, 7, and Kaila, 5) and a pandemic, and her work is even more impressive.

Thomas talks to *Washington FAMILY* about her inspiration for Every Girl Dolls and how she manages all her work.