

## Toy Safety

### New laws combined with parent supervision help maintain safety

As we ring in the New Year, we also ring in a time of new toy safety standards. Just about a year ago (February 10, 2009<sup>1</sup>), the Consumer Product Safety Improvement Act (CPSIA) became effective, placing heavier restrictions on chemical use (such as lead and phthalates [“thah-lates”]) in toys. The new act bars lead (more than trace amounts) in products for kids under age 12 and partially prohibits phthalates – chemicals used to soften plastics and rubber – in toys and child-care items.<sup>2</sup> “The new law also [gave] the Consumer Product Safety Commission (CPSC) the power and resources to regulate the industries for toys and children’s products (like cribs and high chairs). Now, the CPSC... will be able to:

- enforce and oversee mandatory testing of products *before* they ever leave the manufacturing room floor,
- remove unsafe merchandise from shelves faster, and
- heavily penalize companies that don’t follow the letter of the law.

Before the bill, the CPSC scoured store aisles for unsafe items, took consumers’ reports about injuries and concerns, and instituted recalls when they verified a hazard. But what the organization could *not* do was monitor the safety of merchandise – including toys and children’s stuff – *before* it was actually sold.

Toys and kids’ products previously did have to meet federal and industry safety standards (for things like lead paint, as well as choking hazards and sharp points). But these products were *not* tested or approved for safety by a federal agency before they made it to the marketplace. So, although companies were expected to comply with the standards – whether they manufacture products in or import them to the United States – no government entity made sure that the standards were really being followed pre-sale.<sup>2</sup>

So, hopefully, as far as chemicals and other major hazards (like choking and sharp points) are concerned, the toys you found under the tree this year were a little

bit safer. Still, the responsibility for safe toy use lies in good part with the parent. It is still up to us as parents to monitor appropriate toy use among the children in our care and to maintain toys appropriately. This issue of *HealthHints* will provide information on how to keep toy use safe in your home.

### Old or New

#### Heirlooms, keepsakes, and hand-me-downs

Perhaps what you found under the tree this year was a family heirloom or keepsake for your child. Or maybe you found a terrific bargain at a garage sale or resale shop. Take into consideration any manufacture date that you can find on the item. Lead paint was not banned from manufacture until 1978, so chances are, if you are passing on a family heirloom, it may contain lead paint. “Coming into contact with a toy – or anything else containing lead – once or twice probably isn’t cause for too much concern. It’s continual exposure over a period of time that usually causes lead poisoning. Kids can ingest the dangerous, naturally occurring metal when they mouth or swallow something made with lead or lead paint, or when they simply touch it and then put their fingers in their mouths.

Over time, lead poisoning can bring on a host of health problems



like learning and hearing disabilities, behavior and attention problems, hyperactivity, and delayed development. But even low levels of lead in a child's blood can cause subtle difficulties with behavior and learning.

The only way to know for sure whether a child has lead poisoning is through a blood test. All kids should be routinely screened at 1 and 2 years old, says the American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP).<sup>2</sup>



With older or used toys, you also have to be concerned about phthalates. "When it comes to phthalates, scientists know a lot less. Limited studies have been done on their effects on young children, but previous research *has* suggested that phthalates may:

- be toxic to the development of the reproductive organs of animals – and possibly male fetuses,
- affect grown men's reproductive function, and
- change hormone levels in unborn and breastfed babies.

So, some governments worldwide (like the European Union and California) have banned phthalates from being used in toys and child-care products that babies and young kids might put in their mouths.

Unfortunately, you can't just pick up a product to find out if it contains phthalates by looking at the label....<sup>2</sup> Consider this when choosing toys manufactured before the Consumer Product Safety Improvement Act went into effect (February 2009).

It is best to "steer clear of older toys, even hand-me-downs from friends and family. Those toys might have sentimental value and are certainly cost effective, but they may not meet current safety standards and may be so worn from play that they can break and become hazardous."<sup>3</sup>

### Age & Stage Not intelligence & maturity

When choosing toys, always read the label to make sure it is appropriate for the child's age. You can use guidelines published by the CPSC for children [birth through age five](#) and [six through age twelve](#) to help make these decisions. "Still, use your own best judgment – and consider your child's temperament, habits, and behavior whenever you buy a new toy.

You may think that a child who's advanced in comparison to peers can handle toys meant for older kids. But the age levels for toys are determined by safety factors, not intelligence or maturity."<sup>3</sup>

Here are some age-specific guidelines from the American Academy of Family Physicians to keep in mind:<sup>3</sup>

#### For Infants, Toddlers, and Preschoolers:

- "Look for toys that are sturdy enough to withstand pulling and twisting. Make sure that eyes, noses, buttons, and other parts that could break off are securely attached.
- Make sure squeeze toys, rattles, and teethers are large enough that they won't become lodged in a child's mouth or throat, even if squeezed into a smaller compressed shape.



- Avoid toys with cords or long strings, which could present strangulation hazards to young kids.
- Avoid thin plastic toys that might break into small pieces and leave jagged edges that could cut.
- Avoid marbles, coins, balls, and games with balls that are 1.75 inches (4.4 centimeters) in diameter or less because they present choking hazards."<sup>3</sup>

#### For Grade-Schoolers:

- "Bicycles, scooters, skateboards, and inline skates should never be used without helmets that meet current safety standards and other recommended safety gear, like hand, wrist and shin guards. Look for CPSC or Snell certification on the labels.



- Nets should be well constructed and firmly attached to the rim so that they don't become strangulation hazards.
- Toy darts or arrows should have soft tips or suction cups at the end, not hard points.
- Toy guns should be brightly colored so they cannot be mistaken for real weapons, and kids should be taught to never point darts, arrows, or guns at anyone.
- BB guns or pellet rifles should not be given to kids under the age of 16.
- Electric toys should be labeled UL, meaning they meet safety standards set by Underwriters Laboratories."<sup>3</sup>

Also, consider safety when you have children in multiple age groups. Teach children to put their toys away and older children to keep their toys out of reach of their younger siblings. “Toy boxes, too, should be checked for safety. Use a toy chest that has a lid that will stay open in any position to which it is raised, and will not fall unexpectedly on a child. For extra safety, be sure there are ventilation holes for fresh air. Watch for sharp edges that could cut and hinges that could pinch or squeeze. See that toys used outdoors are stored after play – rain or dew can rust or damage a variety of toys and toy parts creating hazards.”<sup>4</sup>

### Choking, Points, & Parts Tips for avoiding hazards

Choking on small parts, small balls, and balloons is the leading cause of toy-related deaths and injuries.<sup>5</sup>

“Since choking is such a big risk in the early years, if your child is 3 years old or younger, consider buying a small-parts tester, also known as a *choke tube*. These tubes are designed to be about the same diameter as a child’s windpipe.

If an object fits inside the tube, then it’s too small for a young child.”<sup>3</sup>

If you don’t have a *choke tube*,

consider that anything that would fit in a toilet paper tube<sup>6</sup> or be smaller than a golf ball is too small for this age group.

Here are some tips for avoiding choking, parts, and points:

- “Avoid cylindrical pieces of toys that can lodge in a child’s airway. Balloons and pieces of balloon can completely block a child’s airway. Never give balloons to children under 8. Mylar balloons are a safer alternative to latex balloons.”<sup>7</sup>



- Check toys occasionally for worn, loose, or broken parts. Throw broken or worn toys away, or repair them immediately. “Older toys can break to reveal parts small enough to be swallowed or to become lodged in a child’s windpipe, ears, or nose. The law bans small parts in new toys intended for children under three. This includes removable small eyes and noses on stuffed toys and dolls, and small, removable squeakers on squeeze toys.”<sup>4</sup> “Toys which have been broken may [also] have dangerous points or prongs. Stuffed toys may have wires inside the toy which could cut or stab if exposed. A CPSC regulation prohibits sharp points in new toys and other articles intended for use by children under eight years of age.”<sup>4</sup>



- Avoid toys with long strings or cords. “Toys with long strings or cords may be dangerous for infants and very young children. The cords may become wrapped around an infant’s neck, causing strangulation. Never hang toys with long strings, cords, loops, or ribbons in cribs or playpens where children can become entangled. Remove crib gyms for the crib when the child can pull up on hands and knees; some children have strangled when they fell across crib gyms stretched across the crib.”<sup>4</sup>

### Fun with a Bang Electronics, noises, & propelled objects

Toys that are electronic, make noise, and/or propel objects can

be a lot of fun, but also come with some distinct hazards.

**Electronics.** “Electric toys that are improperly constructed, wired, or misused can shock or burn. Electric toys must meet mandatory requirements for maximum surface temperatures, electrical construction, and prominent warning labels. Electric toys with heating elements are recommended only for children over eight years old. Children should be taught to use electric toys properly, cautiously, and under adult supervision.”<sup>4</sup>

**Noise.** “Children’s ears are sensitive and especially vulnerable to noise-induced hearing loss. Nearly 15 percent of children 6 to 17 show signs of hearing



loss. This can happen gradually, without pain, which is why prevention is important.”<sup>8</sup> “Toy caps and some noisemaking guns and other toys can produce sounds at noise levels that can damage hearing. The law requires the following label on boxes of caps producing noise above a certain level: “WARNING – Do not fire closer than one foot to the ear. Do not use indoors.” Caps producing noise that can injure a child’s hearing are banned.”<sup>4</sup>

To avoid noise hazards, consider these tips:

- If a toy seems too loud for your ears, it is probably too loud for your child. Don’t buy it.
- Toys used close to the ear (like toy cell phones) should not be louder than 65 decibels, measured from 10 inches away.
- Other toys should not be louder than 85 decibels measured from 10 inches away.

- Take the batteries out of loud toys.
- Cover the toy's speakers with tape.<sup>8</sup>

**Propelled Objects.** “Projectiles – guided missiles and similar flying toys – can be turned into weapons and can injure eyes in particular. Children should never be permitted to play with adult lawn darts or other hobby or sporting equipment that have sharp points. Arrows or darts used by children should have soft cork tips, rubber suction cups, or other protective tips intended to prevent injury. Check to be sure the tips are secure. Avoid those dart guns or other toys which might be capable of firing articles not intended for use in the toy, such as pencils or nails.”<sup>4</sup> Read labels, and use safety goggles or other safety equipment when recommended.

## Keep Children Safe at Home Select, Teach, Play, Supervise

“Protecting children from unsafe toys is the responsibility of everyone. Careful toy selection and proper supervision of children at play is still – and always will be – the best way to protect children from toy-related injuries.”<sup>4</sup> When selecting toys, read labels and be sure:

- toys made of fabric are labeled as flame resistant or flame retardant;
- stuffed toys are washable;
- painted toys are covered with lead-free paint;
- art materials are labeled “nontoxic”; and

This document is meant for educational purposes only and is not intended to replace the advice of your doctor or other health care provider.



- crayons and paints say ASTM D-4236 on the package, which means that they've been evaluated by the American Society for Testing and Materials.<sup>3</sup>

“After you've bought safe [age-appropriate] toys, it's also important to make sure kids know how to use them. The best way to do this is by supervising play. Playing with your kids teaches them how to play safely while having fun.

Parents should:

- Teach kids to put toys away.
- Check toys regularly to make sure that they aren't broken or unusable:
  - Wooden toys shouldn't have splinters.
  - Bikes and outdoor toys shouldn't have rust.
  - Stuffed toys shouldn't have broken seams or exposed removable parts.

- Throw away broken toys, or repair them right away.
- Store outdoor toys when they're not in use so that they are not exposed to rain or snow.

And be sure to keep toys clean. Some plastic toys can be cleaned in the dishwasher, but read the manufacturer's directions first. Another option is to mix antibacterial soap or a mild dishwashing detergent with hot water in a spray bottle and use it to clean toys, rinsing them afterward.”<sup>3</sup>

“To report a product hazard or a product-related injury, write to the U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission, Washington, D.C., 20207, or call the toll-free hotline: 1-800-638-2772. A teletypewriter for the deaf is available at (301) 595-7054.”<sup>4</sup>

May this be a year of safer toy manufacture and use as parents and manufacturers work together to keep children safe at play.



To view the references used in this newsletter, go to:  
<http://fcs.tamu.edu/health/healthhints/2010/jan/ref.php>