

Choosing Safe Toys

There are millions of toys out there, and hundreds of new ones hit the store shelves each year. Toys are supposed to be fun and are an important part of any child's development. But it's sobering to learn that in 2002, more than 212,000 children in the United States were treated in hospital emergency departments for toy-related injuries - and that 13 children died.

Consider these additional statistics from the National SAFE KIDS Campaign:

- Falls and choking cause most toy-related deaths and injuries in children. Choking alone causes one third of all toy-related deaths - most often from balloons.
- Children 4 years old and younger account for almost half of all toy-related injuries and almost all deaths.
- Children younger than age 3 are at the greatest risk of choking because they tend to put objects - especially toys - in their mouths.
- Riding toys – including bicycles and scooters - cause many injuries in children.

Do you know what toys are safe for your child? Toy manufacturers do follow certain guidelines and label most new toys for specific age groups. But perhaps the most important thing you can do - beyond reading labels and inspecting toys carefully - is to supervise your child during play.

The Creation of Safe Toy Standards

The effort to make toys safe for kids began nearly 70 years ago, when the National Safety Council began working together with the toy industry on safety issues, resulting in the creation of the National Clearinghouse for Toy Injuries in 1958.

Around the same time, the American National Standards Institute (ANSI), a private, nonprofit organization that coordinates safety

testing, established a standard for the coating finishes on toys and other children's items.

The U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission (CPSC), created in 1973, closely monitors and regulates toys. The commission has the governmental authority to develop and enforce safety regulations for consumer products, and it spends more than half its budget on children's items alone. Any toys that have been made in - or imported into - the United States after 1995 must comply with the CPSC's Child Safety Protection Act. This includes standards for toys such as the paint used on toy surfaces, noise levels, sharp edges, small parts, and flammability.

In 1976, the toy industry adopted voluntary safety standards, which were reviewed and updated in the early 1980s by the American Society for Testing and Materials (ASTM). These standards are revised periodically and today are the primary guidelines for toy manufacturers. These guidelines include more than 100 separate safety tests and design specifications for toys.

How Toys Are Tested for Safety

Toy companies regularly test toys for safety by consulting with child development experts and by actually testing toys with infants and preschoolers who play at lab facilities. Toys may go through more than 100 tests - all designed to recreate the wear and tear on a toy by an active child.

Toy companies also turn to childhood and development experts to decide which toys are appropriate for each age group. For children younger than age 3, the main concern is that small parts can present a choking hazard. Most of the time, safety - not a child's actual level of intelligence and development - is the reason for the recommended age range that is listed on a toy.

Choosing Toys for Your Child's Age Group

Guidelines published by the CPSC and other organizations can help you determine which types of toys are appropriate for your child. Still, you'll need to use your own judgment when following

the guidelines and packaging labels. Even though toy manufacturers are required to meet safety standards, some toys still may be improperly labeled or have some other unforeseen safety issue by the time they reach the store shelves. And most aren't recalled until a problem with the toy is reported. Despite the CPSC's best efforts, dozens of toys are still on its recall list because of safety concerns that were realized *after* the toys were already distributed to stores.

Whenever buying a new toy, always read labels to make sure the toy is appropriate for your child's age. You may think that because your child seems mature for his or her age, he or she can handle a toy that was meant for an older child. However, you're not doing your child a favor by buying a toy for an advanced age group. Remember, the age-appropriate level for a toy is determined by safety factors.

Always look for toys that appear to be well constructed and that clearly include age recommendations on the labels. Toys made of fabric should be labeled as flame resistant or flame retardant.

Stuffed toys should be washable. All toys should be painted with lead-free paint, and art materials (including crayons) should say nontoxic somewhere on their packaging.

Also, if a new toy is shrink-wrapped, be sure to immediately discard the plastic wrapping after opening the toy for the first time. Small children, especially toddlers, may look at plastic wrap as something new and fun to play with and put it into their mouths and choke. Holiday gift wrapping, ribbons, and bows can be hazards as well.

Federal law bans using small parts in new toys for children younger than 3, and those for kids younger than 8 are supposed to be free of sharp glass and metal edges. But be aware that older toys (like hand-me-downs or toys purchased used) may include sharp edges, break into jagged pieces, or break into parts small enough to be swallowed by a child.

Here are some age-specific guidelines to keep in mind:

For infants, toddlers, and preschoolers:

- Look for toys that are sturdy and well made. Children this age like to pull and twist toys and often try to put them in their mouths. Make sure that eyes, noses, buttons, and other parts that could break off are securely attached. Check toy cars to make sure wheels are on tight.
- Avoid buying toys intended for older children that may have small parts and pose a choking hazard. Make sure squeeze toys, rattles, and teething toys are large enough - even if squeezed down into a smaller, compressed shape - to avoid becoming lodged in your baby's mouth or throat.
- Regularly inspect your child's toys to make sure they are not broken or do not have broken seams where small removable parts (such as squeakers in squeeze toys) could be exposed.
- There are small parts testers, also known as choke tubes, that you can use to determine if any toy or object presents a choking hazard for a child younger than 3 years of age. A choke tube is designed to be about the same diameter as a child's airway (windpipe). If an object fits inside of the tube tester, then it is too small to be within reach of a young child. Choke tubes can be found in children's specialty stores.
- Avoid toys with cords or long strings. These present a strangulation hazard to very young children, as cords or strings can get wrapped around the neck. Never hang a toy around a toddler's neck. Also, never hang toys with long strings or ribbons in a playpen where children could get entangled in them.
- Don't give your child uninflated or broken balloons. Inflated latex balloons present a choking hazard if they pop. Mylar balloons are much less likely to break, but even these can represent a hazard to young children. If you want to use balloons at a child's party or celebration, don't let children blow up the balloons themselves, and be sure to deflate and put away all balloons (or dispose of balloon pieces)

afterward. Always supervise children while they play with balloons.

- 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.
- Avoid walkers. The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) strongly discourages their usage, as they are a main cause of injuries - especially serious head injuries - from falls down stairs in young children.
- Avoid thin plastic toys that might break into small pieces and leave jagged edges that could cut your child.
- When buying art supplies, including crayons and paints, look for the ASTM D-4236 designation on the package. This means the item has been reviewed by an ASTM toxicologist and has been deemed safe for use by children.

For grade-schoolers:

- If you buy your child a bicycle, scooter, skateboard, or inline skates, purchase a helmet that meets current safety standards (turn it over and look inside for either a CPSC or Snell sticker) and other recommended safety equipment (such as hand, wrist, and knee guards). Teach your child how to wear equipment properly. Sporting goods stores can help you properly fit your child's bike helmet and other safety gear.
- According to the CPSC, millions of hazardous toy basketball nets have been recalled. Nets should be well constructed, and not easily come apart from the rim. Children can strangle on nets that become unhooked from the rim or from knots that slide on the rim and create an opening where a child's head could fit through.
- Be aware that balloons are a choking hazard for children up to the age of 8. Don't let your child play with uninflated or broken balloons.

- Toy darts or arrows used by children should have soft tips or suction cups at the end. These toys should never have hard points that could cause facial (especially eye) injuries.
- Toy guns are required to be brightly colored so they cannot be mistaken for a real weapon, and children should be taught to *never* point darts, arrows, or a gun at anyone.
- BB guns or pellet rifles can kill - in fact, they cause about 4 deaths each year. Children younger than 16 years of age should not use these items.
- Electric toys must meet certain safety standards for construction and wiring. Look for labeling that states the toy is UL (Underwriters Laboratories) approved. Adult supervision is always advisable with the use of any electric toys. Toys with heating elements are recommended only for children older than 8 years of age.

Toys in Your Home

The most important thing you can do to ensure your child's safety is to supervise your child while he or she is playing with a toy, even if the item is recommended for your child's age group.

Remember that injuries to children can be prevented most of the time with the use of safe toys *and* proper supervision.

Playing with your child also gives you the opportunity to teach play safety while you're having fun and enjoying time together.

Here are some tips on keeping your child safe at home:

- Teach your child to put toys away and to keep them out of the hands of younger children. Many children are injured when they fall over toys, and younger children might choke on small parts or hurt themselves with sharp points of toys that are meant for older kids.
- Check toys regularly to see if they are damaged or pose a hazard. Throw away broken toys or repair them immediately. Wooden toys should be examined for splinters that can be sanded smooth, for instance. Check outdoor toys and bicycles for rust or weakened parts.

- Toy boxes or storage containers that your child has access to should be checked for safety, too. Store toys in open, plastic crates or on low shelving units. If you use a toy chest with a lid, make sure the lid will stay open when raised and will not fall unexpectedly on your child. It's a good idea for the lid to have ventilation holes as well. Remove any free-falling lids from your child's play space.
- With older toys or hand-me-downs, make sure painted surfaces don't contain lead, and be on the lookout for hazardous substances or objects your child might ingest.
- Toys that are used outside should be stored properly when children are done playing with them. A previously safe toy could become dangerous if damaged or rusted by prolonged exposure to moisture from rain or snow.

It's also important to keep toys clean. Some plastic toys can be cleaned in the dishwasher, although it's best to read the manufacturer's directions before you try this. Another option is to mix antibacterial soap or a mild dishwashing detergent and hot water in a spray bottle and use it to clean toys, rinsing them afterward.

Dangerous Toys

There are many items - not really toys - that children may be tempted to play with that can be dangerous for them. Protect your child by not allowing him or her to play with items such as:

- fireworks
- sharp scissors
- balloons
- walkers
- trampolines (the AAP strongly advises against these backyard items because of the risk of serious injuries if a child falls or collides with another user)

Also, electric toys can shock or burn your child if they're not in proper working order, and flying toys can cause eye injuries if you're not paying close attention.

Loud Toys

When you think about evaluating a toy for safety, checking its noise level is probably not the first thing that comes to mind. However, it is possible for toys to contribute to hearing damage in children. The noise emitted by some rattles, squeak toys, musical toys, or electronic toys can be as loud, in terms of decibels, as a car horn, a lawnmower, or even a rock concert - even louder when you consider that children often hold toys directly to their ear. Some toys, such as noise-making toy guns and caps, are required by the CPSC to include labels that warn against being set off within 12 inches of someone's ear or being used indoors. Additional standards on noise safety were set by the ASTM in November 2003, requiring that hand-held toys not emit sounds greater than 90 decibels at close range and that toys held close to the ear (such as toy cell phones) not exceed 70 decibels. The average phone rings at about 80 decibels, so you can use that as a guideline when deciding whether a toy is too loud for your child.

Other Things to Consider

Shopping for toys online may be convenient, but you should be aware that Internet toy retailers are not required to include information about choking hazards or age-appropriateness in their product descriptions. What's more, some online toy sellers may be foreign manufacturers whose products aren't even required to meet strict U.S. regulations - so be careful when buying online.

Also, as video games and computer games continue to gain in popularity, remember the motto "All things in moderation." The AAP recommends limiting your child's screen time - whether it's video games, computer games, or TV - to 1 or 2 hours per day. You should also monitor your child's video games for violence, making sure your child's games are appropriate for his or her age and development. If your child is younger than 5, choose games that you can play together.

And finally, keep in mind that the best products on the market are not necessarily the most expensive, the flashiest, or the fad toys

that will be all but forgotten in a few months. Choose toys that inspire your child's imagination, and avoid those that promote violence, reinforce negative stereotypes, or limit your child's natural creativity. Often the simplest toys - the ones that don't "do" anything - are the ones your child will love for years to come.

Reporting Unsafe Toys

Check the CPSC website for the latest information about toy recalls or call their hotline at (800) 638-CPSC to report a toy you think is unsafe. If you have any doubt about a toy's safety, do not allow your child to play with it.

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