



Avoiding Dangers that Lurk in Children's Toys

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As with every winter holiday season a flurry of shoppers head to department and toy stores to buy the latest hot toy for the little ones. Up to 80% of toys purchased in U.S. are imports from China which lack needed safety regulations. Many of the toys purchased pose inherent health risk that range from choking hazards to chemical toxicity.

Public health advocate Elizabeth Hitchcock of U.S. PIRG tells the story of Jennifer Tapper, a mother whose son Jack received "Baby's First Train" for his 1st birthday. While playing, Jack removed a block and placed it in his mouth. Fortunately Jennifer was nearby and noticed him chocking. Had she not been near enough to him she wouldn't have performed the Heimlich maneuver which saved his life.

The Consumer Product Safety Commission sets safety standards and regulates toys. The block that Jack chocked on, along with toy parts, balls and balloons that killed 41 children between 2005 and 2009 all surpassed CPSC's small parts standard for children under 3. To increase the margin of safety for small children I advocate the use of the U.S. PIRG's recommendation. They caution that any toy or toy part that is small enough to fit inside of a toilet paper roll not be given to children under 3.

Lead commonly found in costume jewelry and painted toys still pose dangers to small children. Other items found contaminated with lead include vinyl lunch boxes and bibs. The dangers of lead toxicity are well known. There is no amount of lead believed to be safe. Contamination can cause an array of problems in young children such as hampering brain development, causing learning disabilities, reduced IQ, behavioral problems and even death.

Another common health risk found in toys are phthalates. Phthalates are used as softeners in plastic toys and household goods. These endocrine disrupting chemicals mimic the action of our own hormones and are believed to contribute to reproductive problems. The Centers for Disease Control report that children harbor the highest phthalate levels. Although some phthalates are now banned, violations are still being documented. The U.S. PIRG has reported that some soft plastic toys contain up to 30% phthalates by weight. They recommend that mouthing by children of toys suspicious for containing phthalates be prohibited. Since there is no sure way know if the toys our children own contain lead, phthalates or other toxins without testing, it best to discard all suspicious items.

U.S. PIRG, Jennifer and other parents have long urged CPSC to improve standards to better protect children. You can help by signing U.S. PIRG's online petition at www.toysafety.net and view their Tips for Toy Safety to learn more.