

Columnists

Originally published Friday, November 23, 2012 at 5:44 PM

What to keep in mind for buying safe toys

Many of us will give toys as presents this holiday season. We just want to make a kid happy, but we need to be sure those toys are safe.

By Tom Watson

Special to The Seattle Times

A toy is something you play with. It's that simple.

Of course, toys aren't always so simple anymore. Children's toys are a billion-dollar industry, and modern toys usually contain unknown or unpronounceable substances.

Many of us will give toys as presents this holiday season. We just want to make a kid happy, but we need to be sure those toys are safe.

Q: Haven't toys become safer in recent years?

A: Toy recalls have declined since the massive recalls in 2007, which were mostly related to lead paint. But safety and environmental issues persist.

Q: What are the biggest toy-safety concerns?

A: The nonprofit U.S. Public Interest Research Group (seati.ms/SfR2f6) highlights these six toy hazards:

- **Choking.** This is the most common cause of toy-related deaths. Watch for small parts. Keep balloons and small balls away from young children.
- **Toys with powerful magnets.** Small magnets found in many toys can fall out and may look like candy to a small child. Make sure magnets are secure, or avoid magnetic toys altogether.
- **Button batteries.** Keep these tiny batteries away from children. Like magnets, batteries can cause serious injuries when swallowed.
- **Noise.** A loud toy may damage a child's sensitive hearing, especially if held up to the ear. Remove batteries from loud toys or cover speakers with tape.
- **Strangulation hazards.** Make sure mobiles, cords and drawstrings are kept safely away from small children.
- **Toxic chemicals.** Although federal and Washington state regulations now limit lead and certain other toxic substances in toys, not all toy-makers may be in compliance. Be wary of cheap plastic toys and metallic costume jewelry. Read labels of play cosmetics and avoid products containing toluene, xylene or dibutyl phthalate.

Q: What else should I consider when buying toys?

A: The King County Local Hazardous Waste Management Program (seati.ms/Tl7R8r) suggests toy buyers look for international certification symbols on toys because they indicate a higher chemical-safety standard than U.S. standards. The letters CE and a red lion (in a triangle) are the two most common of these symbols.

Q: Where does the toy industry stand on toy safety?

A: Although several toy companies such as Hasbro have made significant strides on product safety and sustainability, some toy manufacturers continue to use low-cost, potentially sketchy chemicals and materials in their toys.

The Toy Industry Association (www.toyassociation.org) or TIA, a national trade group, says safety is the toy industry's number one priority. However, that claim is disputed by Safer States (www.saferstates.com), a national network including the Seattle-based Washington Toxics Coalition (watoxics.org) and more than 20 other environmental and consumer groups.

Safer States points out that TIA has spent hundreds of thousands of dollars in Washington and other states lobbying against bills and policies to protect children from toxic chemicals such as bisphenol A (BPA), formaldehyde, cadmium and phthalates.

Q: Doesn't Washington state require manufacturers to report the use of certain toxic chemicals in toys and other children's products?

A: Yes, and the Washington State Department of Ecology maintains a new database (seati.ms/SjgD58) with that information, the first of its kind in the nation. Unfortunately this database is not designed to be easily used by the public, even though it is open to the public.

Q: Can we end with some good news about safe, eco-friendly toys?

A: As Christmas toy advertising reaches a fever pitch, keep in mind you have more options than ever before for buying safer, greener toys at local retailers or online. More than a dozen independent toy stores in Western Washington have large selections of those types of toys, including regionally made toys. Consider simpler toys, made from wood for example, and limit the number of toys requiring batteries.

In fact, why not reduce environmental impacts by limiting toy purchases in general? Consider buying a few better-made, more durable toys rather than lots of cheap toys that won't last.

A safer, greener toy can provide just as much fun as any other toy. A child won't know the difference. But you will.

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