

Protecting Wisconsin Consumers for 75 Years

Toy safety

Play is essential to a child's development, but poorly designed or improperly used toys can cause injury or even death. By following some basic guidelines, parents can better ensure that playtime is fun, educational, and safe.

Selecting toys

Select toys which are age and development appropriate. For example; while play-dough may be an engaging and enjoyable toy for a three-year-old, it is a choking hazard for an infant. Similarly, a crib mobile that is a delightful spectacle for a one-month old is a choking hazard for an infant old enough to pull themselves up and reach it.

For infants and small children

Choking is the most frequent cause of toy-related deaths, especially for children under three. Toys and their components that are meant for children under the age of three should not be able to be passed through a toilet paper tube. However, this test is not fail-safe: plug or nail-shaped toys, or toys with spherical (round) elements, like small balls, may not be able to pass through the tube, but could still become lodged in a young child's airway.

This is especially true for toys made of foam or other pliable material.

Balloons pose a grave danger because children can choke or suffocate on un-inflated or broken balloons. Do not buy balloons for children less than eight years of age.

Toys that pose choking hazards are required to have warnings printed on their packaging. Look for, and heed, these warnings. All toys should bear a label indicating that they meet "ASTM F963." This means that they comply with various safety standards and labeling requirements. The Consumer Product Safety Commission (CPSC) requires toys to meet these standards.

Neither infants nor toddlers should be given toys or clothing with long strings, ropes or straps. They can easily entangle or even strangle small children. Parents should also avoid giving young kids electric toys, which may cause burns, or toys that have pointy or sharp edges. Young children should not be given toys that are made with metal or glass. Protect young children's hearing by first testing sound-making toys in the store to make sure they are not too loud.

If it is too loud for you, it is definitely too loud for a child's more sensitive ears. Make sure there is a way to turn the volume down, or consider taking the batteries out altogether and using only "child-powered" sound effects instead.

Toxic toys

Children's growing bodies are especially vulnerable to chemical hazards. Special consideration should be given to choosing toys that do not contain toxic substances that can hinder a child's development.

Lead is one hazard to be mindful of. Toy manufacturers have used lead to improve the color, luster and durability of their products, but lead is extremely dangerous, even in small quantities. Exposure can result in serious damage to a child's central nervous system.

Federal standards for lead in children's toys have become more restrictive over the years, but some quantities of lead may still be found in many children's products, new and used. It is most likely to be found in soft plastic toys, metal clothing components like zippers and buttons, painted toys and children's jewelry. Toys least likely to contain lead are those that are made from unpainted and

unvarnished wood or cloth and do not include zippers or other metal pieces.

Although the thought that children's toys may contain lead is frightening, keep in mind that lead paint in older homes can pose an even greater risk of lead exposure. Even if the toy is not made out of any lead-based materials, toys can become covered with dust that contains lead or other contaminants. Because children typically put their hands and toys in their mouths, they can be exposed by swallowing a lot of dust. Therefore, it is important to wipe toys with a damp cloth every so often to clear them of dust.

Phthalates are also chemicals of concern. A phthalate is a type of industrial chemical that is added to many plastic consumer goods to improve flexibility and resilience. Unfortunately, phthalates can leach into the air, food and human bodies they come into contact with. These chemicals build up in human bodies and have been associated with adverse reproductive and respiratory-system health effects. Products manufactured after February of 2009 containing certain types of phthalates in concentrations of more than .01% per phthalate are considered banned hazardous substances by the CPSC.

To minimize children's exposure to phthalates, avoid purchasing pliable plastic toys that were manufactured prior to February of 2009. Also, buy toys from manufacturers that have made commitments to reduce or eliminate the use of phthalates and PVC in their products and packaging.

Battery-operated toys

Only adults should change and charge batteries. Improper installation or mixing different battery types can cause batteries to leak or overheat, which can result in injury. Battery chargers and adapters can pose thermal burn hazards to children. Battery-operated toys should never be taken to bed, because burns or other injuries can be caused by a leaking battery.

There is little that babies love as much as pushing buttons. They frequently seem to be more interested in whatever their caregiver is fiddling with than they do their own toys. However, letting a child play with battery-powered devices that are not meant to be toys, such as remote controls, keyless-entry key fobs, video game controllers, calculators or cell phones, can result in serious injury.

The battery compartments of non-toy devices are not designed to be child-resistant. They may have pop-off doors that are easy to open or fall open when dropped, allowing a child access to a battery. When a lithium battery is swallowed, a chemical reaction that can scorch a child's esophagus takes place.

Similarly, magnets present a serious risk to small children. If two or more magnets are swallowed together, they can attract each other across a child's intestines and cause serious injury or death. Small children should not be allowed to handle toys, jewelry or other household items that contain magnets.

If your child swallows a magnet, or a battery, call 911.

Mobility toys

As babies get older, mobility toys offer an opportunity to develop gross motor skills. However, products such as baby walkers and ride-on toys can be dangerous. Many babies have been injured in stair-fall injuries associated with traditional baby walkers.

If you decide to purchase a baby walker, be sure that it bears a label that reads "Meets New Safety Standard," which means that it is either too wide to fit through a standard doorway or that it has a feature that will stop the walker at the edge of a step. Always actively supervise babies and make sure that any nearby doorways or stairways are secured by gates. Do not let babies use a walker near hot surfaces, dangling cords, toilets, swimming pools or other sources of water.

Similarly, you should only allow children to use a ride-on toy under careful adult supervision in safe areas that are far from stairs, traffic, swimming pools, hills or other hazards. Children on wheeled toys can move surprisingly fast.

Ride-on toys should be suitable to the child's age, size and abilities. Make sure that a ride-on toy will not tip over when in use. Before you give a ride-on toy to a child, try placing weight on any riding point to ensure stability.

For older children

Older children should have ample opportunity to express themselves using non-toxic arts and crafts supplies. Look for the label "ASTM D4236," which indicates that the product has been reviewed by a toxicologist

and labeled with cautionary information as needed.

Bicycles, scooters, skateboards and inline skates are great toys for older children, provided that proper safety gear is used.

Helmets save lives. Do not let children use these toys without one. Knee pads, elbow pads and wrist guards may also spare bruises and broken bones. If you give one of these toys as a gift, be sure to include appropriate safety accessories.

Electric toys are for children at least 8 years of age. Be sure to consider the individual child's capabilities when deciding whether the child is truly mature enough to operate an electric toy. Not every 8 year old is ready to use such toys safely. Trains, miniature stoves, and sewing machines can cause serious burns or shock if toys are old, damaged or misused. It is especially important to supervise children using electric toys.

Avoid dart guns, sling shots and other toys capable of firing small objects. They can cause blinding eye injuries. Select arrows or darts with soft cork tips, rubber suction cups or other protective tips. Such toys are only for older children.

Where to shop

Although buying new may make it easier to avoid purchasing recalled items or items that do not meet current safety standards, garage sales, thrift stores and internet swapping sites can offer some great deals. When shopping for used toys and other children's gear, it is important to make sure you are not bringing anything that has been recalled into your home. The same applies to hand-me-downs. **Recalls.gov** is a website where consumers

can search recalled items, sign up for email alerts and even download a mobile phone application so that you can easily check for recalls when you are on the go.

It is now illegal to sell recalled items. However, that does not mean it never happens. If you have purchased a recalled item, return it to the seller for a refund.

It is a good idea to avoid purchasing toys made with soft plastic that are meant for infants if you are not able to tell whether they were manufactured after phthalate standards became more restrictive. It is also best to avoid painted wood or metal toys, as well as children's clothing and jewelry with rhinestones, metal or vinyl snaps, zippers, closures or appliques. Standards for lead were raised gradually starting in 2008. Toys manufactured most recently have a lower legal limit for lead content.

Be wary of purchasing "no-name" products from discount stores or "fly-by-night" vendors, like street merchants and flea market sellers. Toy-makers may be held legally liable for unsafe products, but only if you are able to identify them.

Be cautious of extraordinary bargains. Some things are just too good to be true. If a product is far less expensive than a comparable item sold elsewhere, it may be counterfeit. Although they may look the same as the authentic item, counterfeit toys are unlikely to meet the same safety requirements and may therefore pose a danger to your child.

Saferproducts.gov is a website where consumers can report and review reports of harm relating to

the use of consumer products. It is a good idea to look up any product you are considering purchasing first to see whether users have raised any safety concerns and how businesses have responded.

Product quality

Wherever you decide to shop, be sure to look for quality in the toys you purchase for children. Poorly constructed toys, or those made from cheap materials, may not be durable enough to withstand normal use. Make sure plush toys have tightly secured eyes, noses and other parts. Keep in mind that children have a knack for being hard on their toys. When toys break, they can have sharp edges that can cut a child, and may become choking hazards. Choose toys that can be easily cleaned.

When bringing a toy home

Start by reading and following the instructions for assembly and use of the toy. Many toy-related accidents are simply the result of normally safe toys being used for the wrong purpose or in unsafe conditions. Inspect the toy to make sure it is in safe condition. Once the toy is assembled, explain or model the proper use of the toy for your child. Be sure to stress the importance of keeping toys, especially plush ones, away from heat sources. A toy could catch fire and burn your child.

Promptly discard all toy packaging. This packaging can be very dangerous to a child. Besides plastic bags, which are a choking and suffocation hazard, they can contain small, sharp parts, like staples and ties. These are cutting hazards.

Hang onto warranty information and usage instructions. You may need to know who to contact if you have a problem with the toy, and you might not remember how to properly clean the toy if it becomes soiled in the future.

If the toy you have purchased came with a product registration card, fill it out and mail it back before you forget. The company will use this in the event it needs to notify you that the toy is being recalled.

Taking care of toys

Teach kids not to leave their toys on the floor. Toys can be stepped on and easily broken. Make sure kids' toys have a designated place to be put away when they are not in use.

Toy boxes do not need lids, but if they have them, they should not automatically lock when closed. Hinges should have a safety mechanism to prevent the lid from slamming onto a child's fingers. Any toy box should be easy for a child to climb out of and have air holes in case of entrapment. Children should never have access to air-tight bins or old storage trunks.

Enlist older children in sharing the responsibility of keeping their toys and games out of reach of their younger siblings. This may require that toys be kept in separate rooms.

Keep toys clean to minimize exposure to irritating allergens and germs that can sicken your child. Avoid using cleaning products with harsh chemical agents, especially on mouthed toys. Non-porous infant toys can usually be put through the dishwasher on the top rack. If your child is allergic to dust mites,

you can keep them at bay by putting any plush toys into the freezer for several hours each week. You may also be able to put plush toys in the laundry machine, but be sure to read and follow the manufacturer's instructions.

Toys should be inspected periodically to ensure that they are in good shape. Toys can become worn out. Wooden toys should not be splintered, plastic toys should not be chipping and no metal pieces or screws that could be swallowed should be exposed. Throw away toys that have bite marks or cracked or peeling paint. Inspect electrical toys to ensure that wiring is not exposed. If you are not able to get a toy clean, it is time to toss it.

Unsafe toys should be thrown away where children cannot find them. Do not save them for rummage sales or pass them on to other children.

A periodic inspection is also good time to assess whether a toy is still safe and appropriate for your child's current developmental stage.

Supervision

There is no substitute for careful supervision of children. Not only can you keep your child safe by keeping a watchful eye on playtime activities, but you will learn how your child likes to play and what his or her capabilities are. You can apply this information in selecting appropriate toys for your child's stage of development. Keep in mind that product warning labels refer to the minimum age at which a toy may be appropriate.

Not every child who reaches the referenced age will be mature enough to safely use the toy yet.

Finally, have fun

Playtime is your child's opportunity to experiment, explore and experience the world. With a little thought and some safety precautions, both parents and children can have a great – and safe – playtime.

For more information or to file a complaint, visit our website or contact the Bureau of Consumer Protection.

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