

How to buy safe toys

4 easy steps to make sure your holiday gifts are free of lead and other dangers

Buying toys used to be fun. Now you have to worry about whether that train set or doll necklace is going to poison the kids on your holiday list. Last year, more than 25 million toys were recalled, many because of lead.

The good news is that toy recalls have slowed down. Even better, Congress recently passed the Consumer Product Safety Improvement Act of 2008, which makes previously voluntary standards for toy safety mandatory and requires that toys be certified to meet those standards. The new law sets tougher standards for lead in all children's products, including vinyl toys, which previously weren't covered by government guidelines. It also prohibits the sale of some children's products containing phthalates, a chemical found in PVC plastic and other materials that could affect a child's development and reproductive system. (For more details see page 29.)

However, many of the new lead laws don't kick in until February 2009 or later, well after the holiday



HOLIDAY SURPRISE
Toy recalls are still a problem. Learn how to avoid giving tainted gifts.

shopping season. And items with worrisome lead levels can end up on store shelves even if they're not on recall lists. So what should you do? It may help to know that some major retailers are already raising the bar on toy safety. In fall 2007, Wal-Mart implemented the Toy Safety Net program, which requires toy suppliers to document through independent third-party labs that their merchandise meets the store's new safety guidelines. Those guidelines limit the levels of phthalates and heavy metals, such as lead, that a toy may contain. Wal-Mart also recommends date coding, so toys are easier to trace in case a safety issue crops up. Toys "R" Us and Target have similar programs. That's reassuring, but don't let your guard down. Tainted toys can still be out there.

4 SAFETY STRATEGIES

1 Know what toys to avoid. Steer clear of no-name toys and, regardless of your child's age, don't buy toys with small magnets, even if the magnets seem safely contained within the toy. If the magnets fall out, they can be accidentally swallowed. Many of last year's recalls involved toys with dangerous magnets that can damage a child's (or pet's) intestines when swallowed in

multiples. Don't buy metal jewelry, especially the cheap stuff, for young children or allow them to play with key chains or items with metal charms. A child who mouths or swallows a piece of lead-laden jewelry—another frequently recalled product—can end up with acute lead poisoning. If you have an infant or toddler who still puts almost everything in her mouth, don't buy squeezable soft plastic toys or books. Unless it says "no phthalates" on the package, there's no way of knowing if they contain the chemical or not, says Sheela Sathyanarayana, M.D., M.P.H., a phthalates researcher at the University of Washington.

2 Buy according to a kid's age. Look for manufacturer's recommended age ranges on toy packaging. (Also see the next page for tips on buying age-appropriate toys.) Age grading is more than a friendly hint. It can alert you to a

possible choking hazard, the presence of small parts, and other dangers. It also affects a toy's play value. Although you might think a more advanced toy will present a welcome challenge, it could be a source of frustration if it's inappropriate for a child's stage of development. And think twice before buying a toy with small parts for a child older than 3 who has a younger sibling. The younger kid will probably find a way to get the toy. Keep all small round or oval objects, including coins, balls, and marbles, away from kids under 3.

3 Check for recalls. Before shopping, go to www.cpsc.gov, a government Web site, to see whether the toys you plan to buy (and the toys already in your home) have been recalled. Also, sign up for free e-mail notices of recalls at www.cpsc.gov/cpsclist.aspx. And if a product you buy comes

5 MONEY-SAVING TIPS

Besides using coupons and snagging sale items, here are some other ways to cut spending on toys.

SET A LIMIT. If your kids are flooded with presents from family and friends every year, set a limit on what you spend, whether on one large gift or a few smaller ones. To make less seem like more, "pick a toy that starts a passion or feeds one," suggests Richard Gottlieb, a toy-industry expert in New York. A kid who likes to use her hands might love a Lego set; a child who enjoys reading might appreciate a set of Roald Dahl books. "Building blocks, nontoxic art supplies, educational video games, musical instruments, and sports equipment last longer with kids than toys that have limited uses," says Jed Baker, Ph.D., a clinical psychologist and author of "No More Meltdowns" (Future Horizons, 2008). Give hints to relatives too. If Grandma is a knitter or Grandpa plays chess, a set of knitting needles and yarn or a beginner chess set can be a bonding

opportunity and a lifelong gift. **SPREAD IT OUT.** Don't give your kids all the gifts at once. Set aside some of the bounty for later, perhaps a snow day when they're home from school. **BE CAUTIOUS WITH USED TOYS.** Little Tikes sturdy plastic playhouses, ride-on toys, and playground equipment are good finds at tag sales and online at a fraction of the original price. With a thorough scrub, they will look like new. But first, go to www.recalls.gov for recalls on toys. Then make sure they have no rough edges or parts



RENT-A-RATTLE Instead of buying toys, check out money-saving rental services.

that could break loose. Good-as-new video games and refurbished equipment can be bargain bonanza at such outlets as GameStop (www.gamestop.com) and EBGames (www.ebgames.com). **CHECK OUT RENTALS.** At www.babyplays.com, you can get four to 10 toys per month via FedEx, keep them until your child gets tired of them (as long as your membership is current), and return them for a fresh batch for a monthly fee of \$26.99 to \$64.99. Toys for infants to age 5 come sanitized and assembled. All toys are third-party certified for safety, according to Lori Pope, who started Baby Plays in 2007, inspired by her 8-month-old twins, who quickly grew bored with their toys. **LOOK BEYOND THE LOGO.** Many popular toys are tied to TV characters such as Elmo and Dora the Explorer. "Ask yourself, 'If I took SpongeBob off this package, what do I have?'" If a toy has nothing to offer beyond the character, don't buy it," Gottlieb says.

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with a registration card, fill it out and send it in so you will be notified directly by the manufacturer if the item is recalled. It's up to retailers to take recalled toys off store shelves, but some products can fall through the cracks. Stay up to date so you won't buy recalled toys, and you'll know which ones to toss among the ones you already have. Once a recalled toy is in your home, it's up to you to keep it away from your family or return it ASAP.

4 Watch where you shop. Be leery of drugstores, airports, and dollar stores. They've been known to carry flimsy plastic toys with dangerous sharp edges or small parts that can break off easily. Thrift stores, consignment shops, yard and garage sales, and eBay often have toys in excellent condition, but check to see that they're well made and have no small magnets or parts. Check www.cpsc.gov for recalls before buying, and wash the toys before giving them.



BABY STEPS

Shopping tips from baby pro Sandra Gordon, author of "Consumer Reports Best Baby Products"

How to buy the right toys and games for the children on your list based on their ages and skill levels



AGES 1 to 3

Filling and dumping help a 1-year-old experience how things relate to each other, enhance hand-eye coordination, and teach basic spatial concepts like "in" and "out," so toddlers will enjoy toys that allow them to fill and spill. From ages 2 to 3, skills like jumping, climbing, and throwing are the name of the game. Kids this age also like toys that sharpen hand-eye coordination. **GIFT IDEAS** Blocks, picture books, fit-together toys, simple puzzles, push-and-pull toys, pounding and shape toys, fill-and-spill sets, and balls.



AGES 3 to 6

By age 3, children start engaging in pretend play. They enjoy acting out grown-up roles and using props like costumes to bring their fantasies to life. They can also become attached to certain dolls or stuffed animals. **GIFT IDEAS** Age-appropriate nontoxic art supplies, books, videos, musical instruments; outdoor toys such as a baseball tee, slide, swing, doll and play houses; hand-held electronics and action figures; or ride-on toys and trikes made for kids age 3. Get a helmet to go with it.



AGES 6 to 8

These kids have energy to burn and like jumping rope, climbing, and bike riding. They also might be interested in crafts and models, and might enjoy collecting things. They crave the challenges of games, books, and puzzles. **GIFT IDEAS** A jump rope, construction sets with motorized parts, 50- to 100-piece jigsaw and 3D puzzles, analog clocks and watches (for learning to tell time), checkers and Chinese checkers, stuffed toys, a badminton set, a sled, a basketball, remote-control cars or boats, in-line roller skates, and craft kits.



AGES 9 to 12

Kids in this age group are interested in reading, science, and crafts such as pottery, knitting, and beading. They can play complex card games, put together intricate parts and puzzles, manipulate tiny screws, and follow directions. They tend to enjoy competitive games and sports. **GIFT IDEAS** Math, word, or spelling games or quizzes; remote-control vehicles; electric trains; arts and craft kits for making jewelry, weaving, knitting, or crocheting; books by a favorite author; and computer games and software.