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Give a Safe Toy to Ensure Holiday Joy

Anyone who has ever watched a child's face upon receiving a gift of a new toy knows the gift giver receives as much joy as the receiver. During the time between Thanksgiving and New Year's Day, more toys are purchased than at any other time of the year as we celebrate Chunakah, Christmas, Kwanza, and Three Kings Day. But as the large numbers of toy recalls in 2007 indicate, just because a toy is found on a store's shelf, there is no guarantee that it is safe.

The Consumer Product Safety Commission issued 75 recalls, affecting millions of children's playthings, during 2007. (In 2006, a total of 39 toy recalls were issued by the CPSC.) Even though the CPSC has established stringent safety standards (including labeling of hazards) to be followed by toy manufacturers, not all manufacturers comply, and no government agency tests toys before they are placed on the retailers' shelves. Any one of us can walk through the toy section of a store and find toys that should be labeled but are not, or labels with misleading wording or small print that are difficult to read. Nonetheless, it is up to ordinary adults to pay attention to potential hazards when giving a child a gift. Further, parents must be especially mindful of the appropriateness of a toy, inspecting each item for hazards and heeding warning labels on toy products when their children receive a new toy.

Every year, thousands of children are treated in the emergency room for toy-related injuries. According to the CPSC, there were approximately 202,300 toy-related injuries in 2005 (the most recent data available); 75% of those injuries occurred in children aged 14 and under. Children under age 5 accounted for 36% of those injuries. Riding toys and flying toys caused the largest number of injuries, but the majority of toy-related deaths resulted from choking.

To reduce the risk of toy-related deaths and injuries in children, the U.S. Public Interest Research Group (USPIRG) and the CPSC offer the following tips:

1. Only buy toys that are age appropriate. Even if you believe the child is precocious, do not purchase toys that are designed for an older child.
2. Avoid choking hazards. Do not buy small toys or toys with small parts for children under age 3 or who still put everything in their mouths. Also, do not give children latex balloons, as they account for 44% of choking deaths. (To determine if a toy poses a choking hazard, see if it will fit through a cardboard toilet paper tube—if it does, it is too small for young children.)
3. Avoid toys with strings, ropes, or cords longer than 7 inches that can pose a strangulation hazard.
4. Buy children safety accessories, especially when giving riding toys and sports equipment. Include a helmet, wrist guards, and knee and elbow pads when appropriate.
5. Never give children under age 16 a motorized vehicle, even if it is child-sized.
6. Do not give a child under six a magnetic toy, as magnets not only pose a choking hazard, but can adhere to each other in the stomach and intestines when swallowed, causing life-threatening complications.
7. Avoid giving children toys with loud noises, as this can lead to hearing loss. (If your child receives a noisy toy, turn the sound off if possible, remove batteries, or put tape over the speaker of the toy to muffle the sound.)

8. Stay away from toys that have actionable parts. Parts that shoot or fly off can injure children, especially their eyes.
9. Be mindful that misused or poorly constructed toys can cause shocks and burns.
10. Always supervise children at play. Read the labels on the toys, and look for indications that the toy has met appropriate safety standards, such as ASTM, ANSI, and UL listings.
11. Inspect toys regularly to be sure they are in good repair. Toys that have broken should be repaired or thrown away, especially if they have sharp edges.
12. Pay attention to recall notices and act accordingly.

If you think a toy is dangerous, report it to the CPSC at 1-800-638-2772 or at online at www.cpsc.gov. Further information about toy safety also is available at the USPIRG at 1-617-747-4370 (www.uspirg.org) and National Safe Kids Campaign at 1-202-662-0600 (www.safekids.org). Additional information about toy safety or other public health concerns is available at the Central Connecticut Health District at 860-721-2822 (www.ccthd.org). Have a safe and healthy holiday!