

Playing it Safe this Holiday Season

Each year, more than 3 billion toys and games are sold in the United States, and more than half of those are sold during the holiday season alone. Although the majority of toys are safe, they can become dangerous if misused or if they fall into the hands of children who are too young to play with them.

It is important for parents to follow the age and safety recommendations on the labels of each toy. The Child Safety Protection Act, a federal toy labeling law, requires manufacturers to place warning labels on toys that pose a choking hazard to young children.

When Selecting a Toy this Season

- Choose toys suitable to your child's age, abilities and skill level. Toys that are not appropriate for your child's age group may pose safety hazards.
- Avoid toys with small removable parts, which could pose a choking hazard to children under age 3. Use a small parts tester (available at toy stores and baby specialty stores) or the tube from a roll of toilet paper. Anything that fits completely inside the tube is a choking hazard to children ages 3 and under.
- Look for high-quality design and construction. Make sure stuffed animals' eyes, noses and other small parts are tightly secured.
- Avoid sharp points or edges on toys for kids under 8.
- Avoid electrical toys with heating elements (batteries or electrical plugs) for children under 8. These toys are a potential burn hazard.
- Avoid toys that produce loud noises. Toy guns and loud electronic games can permanently impair a child's hearing.
- Avoid toys with strings, straps or cords longer than 7 inches. A child can be strangled in loose straps.
- Be sure to read the labels on all toys. Be aware of age and safety recommendations, and take them seriously.

Follow Age Recommendations When Selecting Toys

Many toy-related injuries occur when parents overestimate their child's ability to handle a toy designed for an older age group. Safe Kids Worldwide recommends these guidelines for age-appropriate toys:

Infants under age 1

In the first few months of life, babies stay where you put them. In the second six months, babies begin to reach and crawl and encounter choking hazards. The most suitable toys

for the first year include activity quilts, stuffed animals without button noses or eyes, bath toys, soft dolls, baby swings, cloth books and squeaky toys.

Children ages 1 to 3

Children at this age are curious and have little sense of danger. They like to climb, jump, throw and tumble. The best toys for this age group are books, blocks, fit-together toys, balls, push and pull toys, pounding toys and shape toys.

Children ages 3 to 5

Children at this age love to run. They begin to test their physical strength and develop skills such as the ability to ride a tricycle, finger control and the ability to build with large blocks and construction materials. Toys that are most suitable for this age group include approved nontoxic art supplies, books, videos, musical instruments and outdoor toys such as a baseball tee, slide or swing.

Children ages 5 to 9

During the early years of this age group, children become more creative and more physically active. They can write and play with arts and crafts. They are also able to use simple mechanical toys such as cars and trains. Recommended toys include craft materials, jump ropes, puppets, books, electric trains (ages 8 and up) and sports equipment. Children ages 8 and up can begin to use electrical and battery-operated toys, but should not change batteries themselves.

Children ages 9 to 14

At this age, children enjoy team sports and games that require increased dexterity, such as pick-up sticks, marbles and jacks. Strenuous physical activity is also popular for this age group. Children may begin to develop hobbies and a strong interest in scientific activities. For these children, appropriate gifts include computers, microphones, table and board games, and outdoor and team sports equipment. Make sure older children's toys are kept out of reach of younger children.

A Gift is Not Complete Unless Proper Protective Gear is Included

Bicycles, in-line skates, scooters, skateboards and sleds are also popular gifts for the holidays. If children do not use the proper protective gear or skills, they can be seriously injured or killed.

Each year, in the United States, approximately 130 children ages 14 and under die in bicycle-related crashes and more than 280,000 children ages 14 and under are treated in emergency rooms for bicycle-related injuries.

- Include a helmet as part of a gift. A helmet is a necessity. Bicycle helmets reduce the risk of head injury by as much as 85 percent and the risk of brain injury as much as 88 percent. The helmet should meet the standards developed by the U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission.

- Buy retroactive clothing, stickers or bike reflectors. Use a light and reflectors on the front, sides and back of the bike to increase the child's visibility to drivers.
- Buy a bike horn or a bell as a stocking stuffer. This tool is essential for warning motorists and pedestrians of a bicyclist's approach.
- Buy elbow and knee pads; for inline skates, roller skates and skateboards, include wrist guards.
- Give a gift of inline skating lessons from a professional instructor or a community recreation center. A class can provide valuable instruction on safe and proper techniques.
- Buy a sturdy, well-made sled, preferably with a steering mechanism. Avoid equipment with sharp and jagged edges. Do not let children go sledding near roadways. The American Academy of Orthopaedic Surgeons recommends that children under 12 wear a helmet while sledding.

Check for Recent Recalls

Visit www.recalls.gov regularly to find out about recent toy recalls. Always mail back the warranty and product registration forms for new toys to make sure you will be notified of any recalls.

Additional Safety Information

Visit Safe Kids USA at www.usa.safekids.org for more information about preventing accidental injury in children ages 14 and under or to find your local Safe Kids coalition.