

Toy Safety

McKenzie Pediatrics 2007

Few things make a child happier than a new toy or game. But what seems harmless fun could result in a serious injury. Dangers can and sometimes do lurk in the toy box. And although most toy-related injuries are minor cuts, scrapes, and bruises, children can sometimes be seriously injured or even killed by dangerous toys or the misuse of toys.

Due to tough government regulations and efforts by U.S. toymakers to test products, most toys on the market today are safe. Nonetheless, thousands of children still suffer toy-related injuries every year. Just as parents should read the labels on their child's food, they should also read the labels on their toys to reduce the risk of such injuries. By knowing what to look for when buying toys and practicing a few simple ideas for safe use, you can often prevent problems before they occur.

A common cause of injury is the abuse and misuse of toys, such as throwing toys, jumping on them, or taking them apart. When a toy breaks, sharp or pointed edges can cause a serious injury. Something as innocent as a doll or teddy bear may quickly become a hazard when your child pulls off an eye, removes a button, or exposes a sharp edge.

Another common cause of injury is small, loose, or broken toys and parts. A small toy or part can easily become lodged in a child's ear, nose, or throat. Children can be seriously injured or killed from inhaling, swallowing, or choking on objects such as marbles, small balls, toy parts, or balloons. Small toys and parts intended for older children are also commonly involved in choking deaths among toddlers.

There are many other causes of toy-related injuries. Loose string, rope, ribbons or cord can easily become tangled around your child's neck and strangle her. Eye injuries often result from toys and toy guns that shoot plastic objects, arrows, darts, or pellets. Riding toys are dangerous when ridden in the street or into swimming pools, ponds, or lakes. Beach and pool toys are usually not approved flotation devices, and too many children have drowned resulting from a parent's false sense of security with such toys. Chemistry sets and hobby kits can cause fires, explosions, or poisoning. Electric toys can cause burns and shocks resulting from frayed cords, misuse, or prolonged use of the toy.

Above all else, toy-related injuries are often a result of inadequate supervision. Young children are more interested in having fun than in safety. As a result, improper play improperly supervised could lead to a serious toy-related injury. Proper supervision and teaching safe play are very important.

When considering a toy for purchase, always first read the label. Warning labels provide important information about how to use a toy, what ages the toy is safe for, and whether adult supervision is recommended. Once purchased, be certain to show your child how to use the toy properly.

Age recommendations printed on toy packages are very important. They reflect the safety of a toy based on any possible choking hazards; on the physical ability of the child to play with the toy; on the ability of the child to understand to use the toy; and on the needs and interests at various levels of a child's development. Every child is different. What is right for one child may not suit the skills and needs of another. Match the toy to suit your child's abilities. A toy that is too advanced or too simple for your child may be misused, which could lead to an injury.

Think large when it comes to choosing toys. Make sure all toys and parts are larger than your child's mouth to prevent choking. Check that the eyes, nose, and any other small parts of a soft toy or stuffed animal are secured tightly. When infants and toddlers live in the home, minimize the purchase for older children of toys with small parts, and teach them to keep such toys out of the reach of younger siblings.

Avoid toys that shoot small objects into the air. Avoid toys that make loud noises, such as cap guns, which can harm your child's hearing. Watch out for sharp points or edges. Avoid toys with glass or thin parts.

Don't buy toys with metal parts for a baby or toddler. Avoid toys with loose ribbons or strings, or remove them after purchase.

Finally, avoid toxic items and materials that could cause poisoning. Look for paint sets, crayons, and markers that are labeled nontoxic. Avoid hobby kits and chemistry sets for any child younger than 12 years old. Electric toys should be "UL Approved". Beware toys with small batteries that can be easily removed. Such batteries are not only toxic, they also can pose a choking or swallowing hazard.

Of course, injuries can happen despite your best efforts to choose the safest toy for your child. Supervision is the best way to prevent injuries. Do not allow your child to play with a toy that was intended for an older child. Store all toys designed for older children far out of reach of a curious toddler. Watch older children too, as they might put things in a smaller child's mouth. Make sure your child never plays with toys near stairs, traffic, or swimming pools.

Examine toys regularly, looking for damaged or broken parts that may pose a hazard. Discard damaged toys. Look for splinters on wooden toys, loose eyes or small parts on dolls, rips or exposed wires in stuffed animals, or rust on metal toys. And never store a toy in its original packaging, as staples can cause cuts, and plastic wrap and ties can lead to choking or suffocation. Before birthdays and holidays, remove toys from the packaging before wrapping, and discard the materials.

Playing with toys is an important part of your child's development and growth. Choosing toys carefully will assure that playtime is educational, fun, and, most importantly, safe. By using the guidelines in this article, you can help prevent toy-related injuries, and everyone's holidays will be happier.