

Trouble In Toyland 2011

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(Updated 2:17 p.m.) It's an annual tradition where politicians join pediatricians at the Connecticut Medical Center and the Connecticut Public Interest Research Group to talk about potentially dangerous and toxic toys.

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The toys in the 26th annual **Trouble In Toyland** report are broken down into three categories: toxic, choking, and noise hazards.

The list of threatening and dangerous toys has improved over the years, but ConnPIRG's Marc Walsh said while the Consumer Product Safety Commission does a good job, it doesn't test all the toys on the market.

In 2008, Congress placed strict limits on concentrations of lead and phthalates in toys and gave greater authority and funding to the Consumer Product Safety Commission. Despite this progress, ConnPIRG was able to find lead that exceeds the maximum standard in at least two toys. One of the toys was a toddler plastic book that babies and toddlers could use as a teething instrument.

It also found problems with phthalates in two toys. The "Funny Face" glasses and clown nose Walsh is holding in the picture above exceeds the Consumer Product Safety Commission standard by having 42 times the allowable amount of phthalates.

Phthalates are a hormone disrupter and can be absorbed through the skin. The allowable amount is 1,000 parts per million and the "Funny Face" toy has 42,000 parts per million, Walsh said.

The second category in the report is choking hazards. Between 1999 and 2010, more than 200 children have died from choking on small parts. He said they are encouraging the Consumer Product Safety Commission to expand their definition of small parts to include "near small parts" because even though it may not fit in a child's mouth it could be bent or manipulated to fit in it.

U.S. Sen. Richard Blumenthal, who attends the press conference every year, said the number one choking hazard is balloons.

"Balloons can be killers," he said. While he declined to blow up a balloon and demonstrate this for the cameras, he said balloons are the number one cause of choking and trips to the emergency room.

“They cause deaths every year, preventable deaths as a result of balloons that are popped or shredded and then ingested,” Blumenthal said.

He said even though Connecticut was a leader in getting toy companies to label their products with a “small parts” disclaimer, parents still need to be vigilant when shopping for their children.

Blumenthal blamed the dysfunction in Washington for allowing many of these toys to remain on store shelves.

“Ideological extremism and political gridlock have prevented progress against these kinds of threats to children,” Blumenthal said. “Whether it is chemicals or small parts greater protection for children has been stymied by the political gridlock and dysfunction in Washington and has prevented the passage of the Safe Chemicals Act, which I have supported.”

“The political dysfunction we see in Washington is one of the enablers of those kinds of threats,” he added.

But there are some threats, which could be considered hidden dangers from both parents and the political process.

Karen Brock Gallo, senior program manager at the Injury Prevention Center, said parents need to be vigilant about button batteries, which are often hidden in toys, and are now frequently included in musical greeting cards and other holiday decorations.

“Many button batteries are invisible to parents because they come already installed in the toys,” Gallo said. “Button batteries can be found in a variety of holiday items. From toys, to light up candles to cards.”

She demonstrated this point by pulling open a greeting card which showed three batteries.

“Kids under the age of four are at the greatest risk for swallowing these batteries,” she said.

She said if a child does swallow a battery they could experience coughing, drooling, and discomfort. She said the battery will create a burning sensation and the damage can actually continue even after the battery is removed.

And last but not least there are noisy toys.

The noise limit is 85 decibels for any toy and less for toys meant to be close to a child’s head. The Hot Wheels toy Walsh demonstrated registered at 90 to 93 decibels.

Jeanne Milstein, the state’s child advocate, offered her own toy buying advice: buy a book. She said buy a book then sit down and read the book to your child.

“That’s probably one of the safest holiday toys that you will purchase,” Milstein said.

But the Toy Industry Association says reports like the one by ConnPIRG are misleading and often include “unsubstantiated” information to “needlessly frighten parents.”

“The reports of such organizations ignore that toys are highly regulated and do not contain hazardous substances to which children may be exposed,” it said in a statement. “They ignore that the U.S. government consistently lists toys among the safest of 15 common consumer product categories in the home. And they ignore that less than half of one percent of the estimated three billion toys sold each year in the United States are recalled.”

“In order to keep pace with innovations in toys and potential emerging issues, experts from the industry continually work with medical experts, consumer groups and government officials to further strengthen the rigorous design, production, testing and inspection procedures that assure the safety of toys. The industry is pleased to join with responsible scientists and physicians who can help us meaningfully enhance the safety of our industry’s products.”

Check out ConnPIRG’s dangerous and hazardous toy list from ConnPIRG **here** and the one from the Toy Industry Association **here**.