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For the holidays, let your kids be merry, but also let them be safe

The holidays are supposed to be jolly, but nothing can cast a pall over the celebrating faster than an injury, especially one involving a new toy.

Here are some steps to follow to make sure you don't end up in the emergency room on Christmas morning or any other time during the holidays.

Read labels: Yes, your child may be a genius -- whose isn't? -- but toys have age recommendations for a reason, experts say. When you're buying toys, make sure they're age-appropriate.

"The manufacturers put those ages on there for two reasons: Safety and for developmental appropriateness in terms of frustration levels and fine motor skills," said Dr. Joanne Smith, a pediatrician with St. Vincent Medical Group. "You don't want to frustrate your kids by giving them a toy that they won't play with."

If you're buying art supplies for young children, make sure they are non-toxic and that any paints are lead-free, experts say.

Choking hazards abound at the holidays: The toilet-paper tube test offers

the best protection for your young child, experts agree. If a toy is small enough to slide through a toilet-paper tube, it's a choking hazard.

Pull-toys can also be a hazard, said Cara Fast, manager of the Riley Safety Store at IU Health. Avoid toys with strings longer than 7 inches, which can easily wrap around a child's neck.

Don't leave lights or small ornaments lying around, and remember that wrapping materials, such as bows and ribbons, can be a choking hazard.

Also, make sure that older siblings' toys, which may be safe for them, are not left in the reach of younger children.

Even older children are not immune to choking. Latex balloons are a particular risk for children younger than 8, Fast said. The balloons can pop while being blown up, and pieces may lodge in the throat.

Watch for button batteries: In the past 25

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years, the number of injuries involving these little batteries has increased sevenfold, said Dr. Joseph O'Neil, a developmental pediatrician at Riley Hospital for Children at Indiana University Health.

Easily swallowed by an experimenting toddler, these batteries can create a current in the stomach lining, leading to erosion.

Then, within an hour to several hours after swallowing the battery, the child may complain of a stomachache.

Doctors recommend that if a parent or any other caregiver sees a child swallow a battery, the child should be taken immediately to an emergency room, O'Neil said.

There, doctors will check to make sure the battery is moving through the intestines. In some cases, the child will pass the battery naturally; in others, surgery may be required.

Your best bet is to supervise children closely and make sure that if toys have these batteries, they have covers that are tightly screwed shut.

It's not just children who have to be careful. Sometimes seniors who wear hearing aids that run on these batteries may mistake one of them for a pill and swallow it, O'Neil said.

If you think someone in your house has swallowed a battery, you can call the

National Battery Ingestion Hotline at (202) 625-3333 for advice.

Entertain safely: If adults are drinking alcohol, make sure the glasses with partially consumed drinks are not in a child's reach, O'Neil said.

If you have family members visiting -- or your family is visiting them -- make sure medications are out of reach and not accessible in purses, Smith said.

"We have one of those every year," she said.

Decorations shouldn't be dangerous: Make sure your children can't pull the Christmas tree onto themselves, and keep a fresh tree watered so it doesn't become a fire hazard.

Plug lights into electrical strips rather than directly into the wall, experts say.

If your holiday includes candles, make sure that they are placed so that small children

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can't reach them and be burned.

Keep in mind that poinsettias, holly and mistletoe are all poisonous. If your child has eaten one of these plants or any other potentially toxic material, call the Poison Control Center at (800) 222-1222.

A fire burning in the fireplace may look lovely, but it also poses a potential hazard. Models with glass covers offer no better protection, O'Neil said, because the glass can get hot.

Here are some other tips:

Battery-operated toys are better than toys that use house current for children younger than 10, experts agree. "I would rather have battery-operated as long as the battery is secured and covered with a cover that has a small screw holding it down," O'Neil said.

Accessorize certain toys. If you're giving a child a motorized toy or scooter, make sure that he or she also has a helmet to wear while using it.

"Things like that have the highest rate of death for all toy-related deaths," Fast said.

Supervise your children during play. Get down on the floor and play with them. Watch how they use their toys to make sure they're safe.

You'll likely find it's about more than safety.

"Play is a very normal thing for kids to do, but also play is a very good way for

parents to connect with their children," Fast said.

Call Star reporter Shari Rudavsky at (317) 444-6354.

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