

Buyers beware of unsafe toys

■ A PIRG report warns against hazardous toys, including this year's hot item, the Razor

By Lisa Toth
Oregon Daily Emerald

As parents head into the hustle and bustle of holiday shopping, they may not be aware the Razor, a popular aluminum scooter on many children's wish lists, is considered a hazardous toy.

The national Public Interest Research Group released the 15th-annual "Trouble in Toyland" report detailing 34 dangerous toys on the market this holiday season.

OSPIRG, the Oregon student chapter of PIRG, held a press conference Nov. 21 at the Spencer View Family House to alert parents and children to the dangerous toys available to consumers.

At the press conference, OSPIRG Campus Organizer Jessica Smetana said use of the Razor has resulted in more than 9,400 injuries since it hit the market a year ago.

"There isn't a structural problem, but the children on the boxes are not wearing helmets," Smetana said.

Smetana said because Razors are so new, parents don't place the same amount of emphasis on safety precautions that they would for bikes and in-line skates.

In addition to the Razor, Smetana said the report addresses the balls, balloons and small toys that pose choking and strangulation hazards to children younger than three years old.

The report highlights toys with toxic chemical exposure hazards, focuses on toymaker compliance with the 1994 Federal Child Safety Protection Act and offers tips for parents on which toys parents should not purchase.

"These toys are not in little mom and pop stores," said Alysa Castro, OSPIRG's project coordinator for consumer awareness. "They are in big chain stores like Toys 'R' Us, and parents were really shocked to find that out."

In the past 14 years, PIRG reports have led to 68 toy recalls and enforcement actions by the Consumer

Product Safety Commission.

A CPSC report last year said that of the estimated 153,400 people treated in hospital emergency rooms for toy-related injuries, 45 percent were younger than five years old.

"Bin toys" are the most common choking hazard because they don't have warning labels and are often near cash registers and easily accessible to children.

Castro said parents can test to see if a bin toy is small enough to choke on by sending it through empty toilet paper tube, which is slightly larger than a child's esophagus.

In addition to toy sales in stores, Smetana said Internet toy sales grew from 45 million in 1998 to 425 million in 1999. She said this dramatic increase in parents opting to buy holiday gifts online is due to convenience.

But she said newly emerging toy companies selling products on the Internet are not required to post the same warning labels on the Internet as they do on packages.

"We are urging manufacturers to provide warnings on the Web," Smetana said. "We are urging Congress and CPSC to support proposals that would make hazard warnings mandatory on the Internet."

Castro said despite the hazards, progress is evident because parents are becoming more vigilant about the toys they buy.

"Conditions with toy safety are improving because each year it is harder to find unsafe toys on the shelf," Castro said.

Suzi Blanchard, director of the Co-op Family Center at Spencer View said child-care providers are realizing fewer toys are better for children. She encouraged parents to buy their children wooden toys, art material, pull toys and clay.

"Fill up an empty soda bottle with water," Blanchard said. "Kids will play with it for hours."

Blanchard recommended parents stay away from computerized toys and one-dime nsional toys. She said simple toys cause children to use their imaginations, and they stimulate the brain.

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