

PIRG warns consumers that toys aren't all fun and games

■ Toys may bring a smile to a child's face, but they can also bring a child to the hospital

By Kara Cogswell
Oregon Daily Emerald

Bouncing balls and marbles may seem like perfect stocking stuffers, but consumer advocates warn holiday shoppers to think twice before buying small toys for young children.

According to the 16th annual survey of hazardous toys released by the national Public Interest Research Group in November, the leading cause of toy-related deaths is choking on small toy parts, balls and balloons.

In 2000, six children died from choking on a toy, according to the U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission.

Just because a toy is in the store doesn't mean it is safe, said Kayla Barnes, an Oregon Student Public Interest Research Group consumer advocate.

She advises parents and others buying toys to use common sense, rather than going by product labels for age-appropriateness.

"If your kids put things in their mouth all the time, don't buy small toys for them," Barnes said.

A cardboard toilet paper roll provides an easy way to test whether a toy is small enough for a child to choke on, Barnes added. If a toy fits through the tube, a child may be able to choke on it, she said.

Other potential toy hazards in the PIRG report include hearing loss caused by toys with high noise levels and accidents with toy scooters.

Between January 2001 and July 2001, scooters were involved in 68,530 injuries serious enough to warrant a hospital emergency room visit, according to CPSC.

The PIRG survey also includes a list of recalled and dangerous toys, meant to give consumers an example of what to watch for, but is not all-inclusive, Barnes said.

She said shoppers should remember that not all toys are tested by CPSC, and some toys have no safety warning labels. Hazard warnings are especially lax in online toy retailers — of the 44 Web sites PIRG studied, only three included any safety labeling, and those retailers did not post safety information consistently, according to the report.

Toy industry trade groups have attacked the PIRG report. Toy Industry Association spokesman

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OSPIRG consumer advocate

Frank DiLiberto said organizations such as PIRG use "scare tactics" to convince consumers that toys are not safe.

Unlike the PIRG report, which comes out just once a year, he said, TIA makes safety a priority throughout the year, with safety tips and links to toy manufacturers on the trade group's Web site.

"One of the things we try to stress is that toys are among the safest products brought into the home," he said.

Toy industry groups have also criticized a section of the PIRG report that warns consumers of the dangers of phthalates, chemicals used to soften plastic toys. Phthalates are toxic chemicals that are linked to liver and kidney damage, Barnes said. The

European Union has banned the chemicals in all toys for children under age three, she added.

The TIA maintains that phthalates pose no danger to children. According to a statement released by the group in response to the PIRG report, "over 40 years of independent and government-sponsored research" have given phthalates a "clean bill of health."

Jan Inouye is a lead teacher at the EMU Child Care and Development Center. She has worked in child care for 17 years and said she agreed with the majority of the safety tips provided in the PIRG report. Many of the toy hazards mentioned in the PIRG report, such as balloons, are banned in the child care center, she said.

She questioned using a cardboard toilet paper tube to test whether toy was choke-proof, however, because she thought it was too big to provide an accurate measure. Instead, she suggested parents or others who were unsure about the safety of a toy to ask a child care professional.

Pull toys or toy telephones with string cords can pose a strangulation risk, as well, she said, because young children may wrap the cords around their necks. The PIRG safety guide notes that toys for children under three should not have a cord longer than 12 inches, but Inouye recommended a maximum length closer to 6 inches.

"Children, especially toddlers, just love to put things around their bodies," she said.

The full PIRG toy hazard report, "Trouble in Toyland," is available online at www.toysafety.net.

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