



by *Diana L. Martin*

# Should Your Kids be Playing With That?

As joyous as the holiday season is, every parent of young children experiences some anxiety over children's toys in December. Will your children receive too many toys, cluttering up the house? Will your children like their new toys and play with them for more than 5 minutes? Did your children receive toys that are bound to be a nuisance because they are too loud or too messy? But the number one concern every parent should have is whether the toys their children are playing with are safe. And, unfortunately, due to the lack of transparency regarding the use of harmful toxins in the manufacture of toys, that is often a difficult question to answer.

In 2011, there were 193,200 children under the age of 15 that required emergency room treatment in U.S. hospitals after suffering

toy-related injuries.<sup>1</sup> But this number does not account for latent injuries suffered by children as a result of playing with toxic toys, which can negatively affect still-developing brains and bodies. Although the Consumer Product Safety Improvement Act of 2008 (CPSIA) established safety standards and requirements for children's products, harmful toys continue to make their way to store shelves. The following information will help you determine whether a particular toy is safe for your child to play with.

1. **Lead.** Lead is extremely harmful to children. Exposure to lead can cause IQ deficits, poor hand-eye coordination, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, poor fine motor skills and even permanent brain damage and death in the event of high-level exposure.<sup>2</sup> The CPSIA bans toys and

children's products that contain lead in excess of 100 ppm from sale in the United States,<sup>3</sup> but these toys still make it into the marketplace because lead paint is widely used in other countries, such as China, India, Mexico, and the Philippines.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, the level of lead allowed in children's toys sold in the United States is more than double the limit of 40ppm recommended by the American Academy of Pediatrics, which views any level of lead exposure to children as harmful.<sup>5</sup>

So, how can you ensure that your child is not playing with toys that contain unsafe levels of lead? Short of having all toys professionally tested, there is no failsafe method. But Consumer Reports and other consumer organizations offer several suggestions:

- Don't allow your children to play with no-name products from dollar stores, street fairs, vending machines, thrift stores, and yard sales.
- Don't allow children to play with costume or cheap jewelry, particularly if the jewelry feels heavier than it looks or leaves a gray mark after being rubbed on paper.
- Make sure all arts and crafts items are labeled non-toxic and that paints and glues are water-based.
- Avoid small metal toys or magnets that could fit in a child's mouth.
- Avoid toys manufactured prior to 2011, when the CPSIA reduced the amount of allowable lead in toys from 300 to 100 ppm.
- Choose toys made from unpainted wood.

Additionally, the American Academy of Pediatrics and Consumer Reports recommend that children receive regular blood tests from their doctors to ensure the absence of lead.

There are also home-testing kits available that you can use to detect the presence of lead in your home. These tests can only detect surface lead, and they are not able to indicate how much lead is present in a tested object. Consumer Reports tested several such home tests and determined that results could vary based upon the color of paint that was tested. Because the tests are inexpensive, it recommended using multiple tests from different manufacturers.

2. **Phthalates.** Aside from lead being used as a stabilizer in vinyl (PVC) plastic, manufacturers use chemicals called phthalates to make plastic softer, transparent, and more pliable. Phthalates have been found to cause hormonal disruption and cancer in laboratory animals. The CPSIA banned the use of several phthalates in children's toys, but requires manufacturers to test and certify as phthalate free only those toys manufactured on or after January 1, 2012.<sup>6</sup> And, the ban applies to children's toys, but not other children's items, like school supplies, which were recently found to contain high levels of phthalates.<sup>7</sup> To avoid phthalates, buy toys made in

2012 or later and, for plastic non-toy items, buy only those items labeled by the manufacturer as "phthalate free."

3. **Cadmium.** Due to the restrictions on the use of lead, some manufacturers have replaced lead in children's toys with cadmium, which is a soft, bluish-white metal that is toxic. Cadmium is a carcinogen that can cause developmental problems as well as kidney and bone damage. While several major retailers have committed to testing children's jewelry for cadmium, contaminated products have still found their way into circulation.<sup>8</sup> As with lead, there are home test kits that can be used to detect the presence of cadmium, but no reports as to the efficacy of these tests are available. The Center for Environmental Health recommends completely avoiding cheap metal jewelry, made for either children or adults, to avoid harmful exposure to cadmium.
4. **Flame retardants.** Stuffed animals, plush toys, and children's upholstered items may contain a large amount of chemical fire retardants that are known carcinogens. California lists the flame retardant TDCPP to its list of known cancer-causing chemicals. It was used as a flame retardant in the 1970s until it was determined to have adverse health effects. But, it is apparently still used in children's products as an additive to polyurethane foam.<sup>9</sup> After discovering baby and children's products made with TDCPP being sold in

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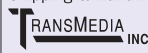
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


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stores, the Center for Environmental Health recently filed a lawsuit against Wal-Mart, Babies-R-US, and Target to stop the practice.<sup>10</sup> To avoid exposing your children to TDCPP and other chemical flame retardants, the Washington Toxics Coalition recommends using children's products, such as car seats, high chair and changing table pads, and baby carriers, that are made with cotton, wool, or polyester instead of polyurethane foam. BabyBjorn, Baby Luxe Organic, Orbit baby, and Bobby purport to make their products without added flame retardants.

5. **Formaldehyde.** Formaldehyde is a volatile organic compound that is often used to treat clothing to make it wrinkle resistant and has been used to make both children's clothing and children's bedding, as well as items made from pressed or composite wood. California has listed formaldehyde as a known carcinogen, and it has been noted to cause leukemia, nose and throat cancer, asthma, and skin problems.<sup>11</sup> To avoid children's products that contain formaldehyde, the Washington Toxics Coalition recommends choosing baby products from companies that state they do not use formaldehyde in their products, avoid manufactured wood products unless the products specifically note they are formaldehyde-free, and avoid buying clothing that is labeled pre-shrunk or wrinkle-free.<sup>12</sup>

Parents reading this list are likely to feel overwhelmed at the daunting task of ensuring that toxic toys do not reach the hands of their children. But until all manufacturers take care to sell products made only with materials that have proven to be safe, it is a job that only a parent can do. █

<sup>1</sup> See *Toy-Related Deaths and Injuries Calendar Year 2011 Report by U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission*, p. 8, available at <http://www.cpsc.gov/library/foia/foia13/os/toymemo11.pdf>.

<sup>2</sup> *Trouble in Toyland 2012 Report by U.S. Public Interest Research Group*, p. 5, available at [http://www.uspirg.org/sites/pirg/files/reports/USPIRG\\_Trouble\\_in\\_Toyland\\_0.pdf](http://www.uspirg.org/sites/pirg/files/reports/USPIRG_Trouble_in_Toyland_0.pdf).

<sup>3</sup> *Trouble in Toyland 2012 Report by U.S. Public Interest Research Group*, p. 6, available at [http://www.uspirg.org/sites/pirg/files/reports/USPIRG\\_Trouble\\_in\\_Toyland\\_0.pdf](http://www.uspirg.org/sites/pirg/files/reports/USPIRG_Trouble_in_Toyland_0.pdf).

<sup>4</sup> The European Union recently funded a project of the IPEN aimed at eliminating the use of lead-based paints globally by the year 2020. See *Global Lead Paint Elimination by 2020 Report by IPEN*, available at [http://ipen.org/pdfs/ipen\\_global\\_lead\\_paint\\_elimination\\_report\\_2012.pdf](http://ipen.org/pdfs/ipen_global_lead_paint_elimination_report_2012.pdf).

<sup>5</sup> *Trouble in Toyland 2012 Report by U.S. Public Interest Research Group*, p. 6, available at [http://www.uspirg.org/sites/pirg/files/reports/USPIRG\\_Trouble\\_in\\_Toyland\\_0.pdf](http://www.uspirg.org/sites/pirg/files/reports/USPIRG_Trouble_in_Toyland_0.pdf); Testimony of Dana Best, MS, MPH, FAAP on behalf of the American Academy of Pediatrics before the Energy and Commerce Subcommittee on Commerce, Trade, and Consumer Protection, p. 11, available at <http://www.aap.org/en-us/advocacy-and-policy/federal-advocacy/Documents/ProtectingChildrenfromLead-TaintedImports.pdf>.

<sup>6</sup> See <http://www.cpsc.gov/info/toysafety/phthalatesfaq.html#what>.

<sup>7</sup> See <http://abcnews.go.com/Health/Wellness/phthalates-chemicals-banned-toys-school-supplies-center-health/story?id=17086775>.

<sup>8</sup> Justin Pritchard, *Cadmium In Jewelry: Federal Regulators Failed To Protect Children From Cancer-Causing Metals*, *Huffington Post*, Oct. 14, 2012, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/10/14/cadmium-in-jewelry\\_n\\_1965192.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2012/10/14/cadmium-in-jewelry_n_1965192.html).

<sup>9</sup> See <http://watoxics.org/chemicals-of-concern/chlorinated-tris>.

<sup>10</sup> Amy Westervelt, *Target, Walmart, Babies-R-Us Sued Over Toxic Baby Products*, *Forbes*, Dec., 6, 2012, <http://www.forbes.com/sites/amywestervelt/2012/12/06/target-walmart-babies-r-us-named-in-legal-action-for-selling-baby-products-containing-cancer-causing-flame-retardant/>

<sup>11</sup> <http://watoxics.org/chemicals-of-concern/formaldehyde>.

<sup>12</sup> *Id.*



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