

Toy Safety

How can parents be sure that a toy is safe? It is not always easy to tell.

When Buying Toys

Choose toys with care. Keep in mind the child's age, interests and skill level.

Look for quality design and construction in all toys for all ages.

Make sure that all directions or instructions are clear -- to you, and, when appropriate, to the child. Plastic wrappings on toys should be discarded at once before they become deadly playthings.

Be a label reader. Look for and heed age recommendations, such as "Not recommended for children under three". Look for other safety labels including: "Flame retardant/Flame resistant" on fabric products and "Washable/hygienic materials" on stuffed toys and dolls.

When Maintaining Toys

Check all toys periodically for breakage and potential hazards. A damaged or dangerous toy should be thrown away or repaired immediately.

When Storing Toys

Teach children to put their toys safely away on shelves or in a toy chest after playing to prevent trips and falls.

Toy boxes, too, should be checked for safety. Use a toy chest that has a lid that will stay open in any position to which it is raised, and will not fall unexpectedly on a child. For extra safety, be sure there are ventilation holes for fresh air. Watch for sharp edges that could cut and hinges that could pinch or squeeze. See that toys used outdoors are stored after play -- rain or dew can rust or damage a variety of toys and toy parts creating hazards.

Sharp Edges

New toys intended for children under eight years of age should be free of sharp glass and metal edges.

With use, however, older toys may break, exposing cutting edges.

Small Parts

The law bans small parts in new toys intended for children under three.

Be conscious of objects that have potentially dangerous small parts: removable eyes and noses on stuffed toys and dolls; small, removable squeakers on squeeze toys; and little figures and pieces fitted into larger toys.

If you have a child that tends to put things in her mouth, avoid toys that are smaller than the child's fist or that fit through a cardboard toilet paper roll.

Older toys can break to reveal parts small enough to be swallowed or to become lodged in a child's windpipe, ears or nose.

Avoid marbles, balls, and games with balls that have a diameter of 45 mm (1.75 inches) or less. These products may also pose a choking hazard to young children.

Note: This is based on the USA safety standards. The current Australian and European standard is 32 mm

If you are unsure of the durability of a toy that may break into small parts, don't buy it!

Cords and Strings

Toys with long strings or cords may be dangerous for infants and very young children. The cords may become wrapped around an infant's neck, causing strangulation.

Never hang toys with long strings, cords, loops, or ribbons in cribs or playpens where children can become entangled.

Remove crib gyms for the crib when the child can pull up on hands and knees; some children have strangled when they fell across crib gyms stretched across the crib.

Parents should remove beads, knobs, or other attachments from their child's pull toy cord if the cord is over 300 mm (12 inches) long

Mobiles are not toys, hang them where the child can see them but far enough away that the child cannot reach them.

Sharp Points

Toys which have been broken may have dangerous points or prongs. Stuffed toys may have wires inside the toy which could cut or stab if exposed. Toys with sharp points or edges can lacerate, cut or puncture skin. A regulation prohibits sharp points in new toys and other articles intended for use by children under eight years of age.

Propelled Objects

Projectiles -- guided missiles and similar flying toys -- can be turned into weapons and can injure eyes in particular. Children should never be permitted to play with adult lawn darts or other hobby or sporting equipment that have sharp points. Arrows or darts used by children should have soft cork tips, rubber suction cups or other protective tips intended to prevent injury. Check to be sure the tips are secure. Avoid those dart guns or other toys which might be capable of firing articles not intended for use in the toy, such as pencils or nails.

All Toys Are Not For All Children

Keep toys designed for older children out of the hands of little ones. Follow labels that give age recommendations -- some toys are recommended for older children because they may be hazardous in the hands of a younger child. Teach older children to help keep their toys away from younger brothers and sisters.

Infant Toys

Infant toys, such as rattles, squeeze toys, and teethingers, should be large enough so that they cannot enter and become lodged in an infant's throat.

Be wary of rattle-shaped toys, such as xylophone mallets, that are not required to and may not meet the rattle test because they are intended for older children.

Crib Toys

Examine crib toys for possible strangulation hazards, look at the labelling of the toy and at the length of any cords or strings.

Crib gyms (toys that are stretched across the crib) should always be removed from the crib when babies can get up on hands and knees (or at the latest 7 months old).

Crib toys should not have cords or strings longer than 150 mm (6 inches).

PVC

Polyvinyl Chloride (PVC) Toys Containing Phthalates

Although phthalates have been used as plasticizers to soften plastic toys for many years, questions are now being raised about whether their use is appropriate in toys for very young children.

The debate on the use of phthalates has been expanding in the United States and in Europe. As part of its 1999 toy safety recommendations, the U.S.-based Public Interest Research Group (PIRG) urged parents not to buy toys containing phthalates. On Dec. 1, 1999, the European Union (EU) Commission approved an emergency EU-wide ban on phthalates in toys designed to be put in children's mouths. The ban is in effect in 15 countries

Since PIRG's 1998 news conference and a CPSC report in December 1998, many toy companies have announced a phthalate phase-out in teething toys. PIRG strongly believes that parents should not expose their children to toxic phthalate chemicals in any toy. Unfortunately, no Australian or U.S. law requires disclosure - and many toys made of PVC are labelled "non-toxic."

Any soft plastic toy may pose a hazard unless marked as PVC or phthalate free, call the manufacturer to find out if the toy contains phthalates or PVC.

An increasing number of toy manufacturers are switching to plasticizers made with citrate esters, which have a long history of safe use and widespread regulatory acceptance. Citrate esters are approved for use in such diverse applications as pharmaceutical tablet coatings, medical tubing and devices, and products that have direct contact with food such as vinyl film wraps. They are also used in cosmetic formulations, including shampoos, fragrances, deodorants and detergents.

Balloons

Even balloons, when uninflated or broken, can choke or suffocate if young children try to swallow them. Always supervise children with balloons, inflated or not.

Keep balloons away from children under 8.

Remember, if a balloon bursts while a child is blowing it up, it could be inhaled. Look for pieces behind chairs.

Balloons labelled "Baby's First Birthday" or with cartoon figures attractive to toddlers, are particularly inappropriate.

Buy Mylar balloons instead of latex to avoid the choking hazard.

More children have suffocated on uninflated balloons and pieces of broken balloons than on any other type of toy.

Our Responsibility

Australia has safety regulations for certain toys and other children's articles. Manufacturers must design and manufacture their products to meet these regulations so that hazardous products are not sold.

Your Responsibility

Protecting children from unsafe toys is the responsibility of everyone. Careful toy selection and proper supervision of children at play is still -- and always will be -- the best way to protect children from toy-related injuries

"Parents need to supervise young children playing with toys. There is no substitute for common sense."