

Choosing Safe Toys for Toddlers and Preschoolers

Millions of toys are out there, and hundreds of new ones hit the stores each year. Toys are supposed to be fun and are an important part of any child's development. But each year, scores of kids are treated in hospital emergency departments for toy-related injuries. Choking is a particular risk for kids ages 3 or younger, because they tend to put objects in their mouths.

Manufacturers follow certain guidelines and label most new toys for specific age groups. But perhaps the most important thing a parent can do is to supervise play.

What to Look For

The U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission (CPSC) closely monitors and regulates toys. Any toys made in — or imported into — the United States after 1995 must comply with CPSC standards.



Here are some general guidelines to keep in mind when toy-shopping:

- Toys made of fabric should be labeled as flame resistant or flame retardant.
- Stuffed toys should be washable.
- Painted toys should be covered with lead-free paint.
- Art materials should say nontoxic.

- Crayons and paints should say ASTM D-4236 on the package, which means that they've been evaluated by the American Society for Testing and Materials.

Steer clear of older toys, even hand-me-downs from friends and family. Those toys might have sentimental value and are certainly cost-effective, but they may not meet current safety standards and may be so worn from play that they can break and become hazardous.

And make sure a toy isn't too loud for your child. The noise of some rattles, squeak toys, and musical or electronic toys can be as loud as a car horn — even louder if a child holds it directly to the ears — and can contribute to hearing loss.

Safe Toys for Infants, Toddlers, and Preschoolers

Always read labels to make sure a toy is appropriate for a child's age. Guidelines published by the CPSC and other groups can help you make those buying decisions.

Still, use your own best judgment — and consider your child's temperament, habits, and behavior whenever you buy a new toy. You may think that a child who's advanced in comparison to peers can handle toys meant for older kids. But the age levels for toys are determined by safety factors, not intelligence or maturity.

Here are some age-specific guidelines to keep in mind:

- Toys should be large enough - at least 1¼" (3 centimeters) in diameter and 2¼" (6 centimeters) in length - so that they can't be swallowed or lodged in the windpipe. A small-parts tester, or choke tube, can determine if a toy is too small. These tubes are designed to be about the same diameter as a child's windpipe. If an object fits inside the tube, then it's too small for a young child. If you can't find one of these products, a toilet paper roll can be used for the same purpose.
- Avoid marbles, coins, balls, and games with balls that are 1.75 inches (4.4 centimeters) in diameter or less because they can become lodged in the throat above the windpipe and restrict breathing.
- Battery-operated toys should have battery cases that secure with screws so that kids cannot pry them open. Batteries and battery fluid pose serious risks, including choking, internal bleeding, and chemical burns.
- When checking a toy for a baby or toddler, make sure it's unbreakable and strong enough to withstand chewing. Also, make sure it doesn't have:

- sharp ends or small parts like eyes, wheels, or buttons that can be pulled loose.
 - small ends that can extend into the back of the mouth.
 - strings longer than 7 inches (18 centimeters).
 - parts that could become pinch points for small fingers.
- Most riding toys can be used once a child is able to sit up well while unsupported - but check with the manufacturer's recommendation. Riding toys like rocking horses and wagons should come with safety harnesses or straps and be stable and secure enough to prevent tipping.
- Hand-me-down and homemade toys should be carefully evaluated. They may not have undergone testing for safety. Do not give your infant painted toys made before 1978; they may have paint that contains lead.
- Stuffed animals and other toys that are sold or given away at carnivals, fairs, and in vending machines are not required to meet safety standards. Check carnival toys carefully for loose parts and sharp edges before giving them to your infant.

Keeping Toys Safe at Home

After you've bought safe toys, it's also important to make sure kids know how to use them. The best way to do this is by supervising play. Playing with your kids teaches them how to play safely while having fun.

Parents should:

- Teach kids to put toys away.
- Check toys regularly to make sure that they aren't broken or unusable:
 - Wooden toys shouldn't have splinters.
 - Bikes and outdoor toys shouldn't have rust.
 - Stuffed toys shouldn't have broken seams or exposed removable parts.
- Throw away broken toys or repair them right away.

- Store outdoor toys when they're not in use so that they are not exposed to rain or snow.

And be sure to keep toys clean. Some plastic toys can be cleaned in the dishwasher, but read the manufacturer's directions first. Another option is to mix antibacterial soap or a mild dishwashing detergent with hot water in a spray bottle and use it to clean toys, rinsing them afterward.

Dangerous Objects

Many non-toys also can tempt kids. It's important to keep them away from:

- fireworks
- matches
- sharp scissors
- balloons (uninflated or broken balloons can be choking hazards)

Reporting Unsafe Toys

Check the CPSC website for the latest information about toy recalls or call their hotline at (800) 638-CPSC to report a toy you think is unsafe.

If you have any doubt about a toy's safety, err on the side of caution and do not allow your child to play with it.

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