

Holiday gift guide: Choosing safe toys for children

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Any toy that can fit inside a toilet paper tube -- such as these marbles -- is easily swallowed and thus is too small for children under 3 years old. Photo by Jennifer Pack via Creative Commons.

(Medical Xpress) -- More than 180,000 children were treated in U.S. emergency rooms for toy-related injuries last year. Here, two UNC Health Care experts offer toy-safety tips for the kids in your life.

Marbles. Magnets. Super balls. [Candy](#). [Coins](#). Dice. Legos. A Barbie doll's shoes.

When [children](#) under age three encounter these objects, they're liable to swallow them.

"They're using their mouth as much as they're using their hands to

explore,” said Adam Zolotor, MD, DrPH, an assistant professor of family medicine at UNC and a faculty member at the UNC Injury Prevention Research Center. “Also, they don’t have judgment.”

So if you’re selecting a toy for a young child this holiday season, be sure to choose an age-appropriate gift.

The first step, Zolotor said, is to check the packaging guidelines. If a toy isn’t recommended for a child younger than three, don’t purchase it for an infant or toddler.

If you’re not sure whether a toy is too small, try putting it in a toilet paper tube. Any toy that fits in the tube is too small for a child under 3.

Swallowing a toy can be dangerous. Zolotor once treated a child who incurred permanent brain damage after a marble blocked her airway.

Seventeen U.S. children died in 2010 of toy-related injuries, according to the U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission. And more than 180,000 children were treated in emergency rooms last year for injuries associated with toys.

Even if a toy isn’t immediately life-threatening – like a crayon stuck in an ear – removing it may require holding down or sedating the child.

“It’s really traumatic and scary,” Zolotor said.

Hand-me-down safety

You should also be cautious about buying older toys from second-hand shops.

Check the toys for breakable parts or small pieces that may fall off, such

as the eyes or noses of dolls and stuffed animals. If you're purchasing a used electronic toy, ensure that the battery cover is intact and not missing any screws, Zolotor said.

Hand-me-down toys may also contain phthalates, hormone-like chemicals that may cause reproductive problems. The good news is that under a 2008 federal law, U.S. retailers, including thrift-store owners, are banned from selling toys containing phthalates. The same law limited the amount of lead, a heavy metal that can cause brain damage, that is permissible in toys. But retailers are not required to test toys before selling them.

If you don't know when and where a second-hand toy was manufactured, Zolotor said, it's probably best avoided.

An older child's toys

During the holiday season and beyond, you should also keep young children away from older siblings' toys. That requires constant vigilance – a tall order for the parent of active children – but limiting your younger child's access to unsafe toys can help.

First, allow older children to play with toys with small parts – such as board games – only in their own room or in another space where the younger child won't be playing unsupervised, Zolotor said. Use gates or special doors to keep toddlers out of rooms containing unsafe toys.

Danger in the Nativity scene

Remember that your holiday decorations may also pose a safety threat to young children.

“Be mindful of small, intricate decorations – like Nativity scenes,” said Dalton Sawyer, director of emergency preparedness and business continuity planning for UNC Health Care.

Children may not understand that ornaments are not [toys](#), so don’t use breakable decorations until they are older. And place burning candles only where children can’t reach.

Watch out for holiday plants as well: Mistletoe, holly berries and Christmas cactus are poisonous, and poinsettias may cause an upset stomach.

Provided by University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill School of Medicine

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