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Today's Business: Toy safety goes beyond the holiday season

William M. Bloss

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William Bloss; Contributed photo

People the world over are on lockdown and taking other precautions to protect themselves from COVID-19. But one danger that has been overlooked during this time is toy safety.

As more and more children stay home due to remote learning, there is more opportunity for them to get injured by their toys. One other major concern parents must be aware of is the lapse in toy inspections caused by the coronavirus pandemic. In addition, parents also need to be mindful of the ease with which technology gifts can be hacked.

A USA Today investigation found that the Consumer Product Safety Commission (CPSC) removed toy inspectors from ports throughout the United States for more than six months. They did this to prevent the inspectors from getting COVID, but in doing so they caused safety inspections to drop dangerously.

Violations that saw a significant drop this September compared to last year include toys with small parts, a choking hazard. Another drop was seen involving children's products with hazardous levels of chemical phthalates.

Also, the CPSC did not flag toys at the ports between June and July for poisonous lead levels. In August, port inspectors reported their total monthly activity added up to 47 screenings for all hazards, which is less than 2 percent in a pre-pandemic month.

Once the toys get into the hands of children, there are additional safety concerns. Even if the toys are completely safe, an issue that has cropped up during the pandemic is when younger children stay home and play with their older siblings while their parents are in another room, working from home. While this doesn't seem like a problem on the surface, it is concerning. If a younger sibling is playing with an older sibling, they could get hurt. Keep in mind that toys are made for different ages and developmental stages. Even children who seem more advanced than they are should not use toys meant for older kids.

As always, be careful of toys with small parts, which are choking hazards. Most toys with small parts are labeled, but not all. And pay attention to toys that might contain small batteries or magnets.

The U.S. Public Interest Research Group (<https://uspirg.org>) puts out an annual Trouble in Toyland report detailing which toys have issues; don't forget to look at past year's reports to find older toys that may still be available.

The CPSC also has a collection of recall information that can prove invaluable for parents and caregivers, at www.cpsc.gov/Recalls.

Meanwhile, technology toys are fun for children, yet parents need to be cognizant of the risks associated with this type of gift. They are easily hacked, and identities can be stolen. Also, toys connected to the Internet can direct kids to inappropriate sites.

First of all, when purchasing a technology toy, do your research. Read reviews and parental blogs to see what issues may have cropped up with that particular toy.

Also, when configuring high-tech kids' toys (and your own gadgets, as well), make sure to use strong passwords. This makes it much more difficult for someone to hack. And consider creating usernames that are nicknames, not real names. The less personal information out there, the better.

Lastly, never use these toys on public Wi-Fi — if you do, hackers can easily gain access to the toy and can retrieve sensitive information.

Toys should be fun for children as well as offer them a creative outlet. By following these steps, you'll ensure that your children's toys won't pose a threat to them.

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