

PRESS RELEASE

EMBARGOED FOR RELEASE:

Tuesday, November 21, 2000 9:30 a.m. EST

CONTACT: Rachel Weintraub

or Liz Hitchcock, U.S. PIRG

(202) 546-9707

PIRG SURVEY FINDS HAZARDOUS TOYS

Consumer Group Warns Shoppers About Hidden Dangers

-- Choke Hazards, Toxic Chemical Hazards, Need for Internet Warnings Described --

Hazardous toys can still be found on store shelves across the country despite passage of the 1994 Child Safety Protection Act, according to a nationwide survey released today by the U.S. Public Interest Research Group (U.S. PIRG). The annual PIRG report, available on the web at www.toysafety.net, has resulted in 68 recalls and other enforcement actions in the last 14 years.

While the group's 15th annual survey noted some signs of improvement, there were still 152,600 emergency room visits for toy-related injuries in 1999 alone. The report also warns consumers about a number of plastic PVC toys posing toxic hazards from phthalates and urges manufacturers to voluntarily disclose whether the toy contains phthalates or PVC.

"Children are needlessly choking to death on toys and dangerous toys can still be found on store shelves," said Rachel Weintraub, staff attorney at U.S. PIRG and author of this year's Trouble in Toyland report. "Consumers should remember that just because a toy appears on store shelves, or doesn't appear on PIRG's list, doesn't mean that it is safe. Consumers can get a list of tips for toy safety and the report at www.toysafety.net," she added.

The annual PIRG "Trouble in Toyland" report lists dangerous toys found during a survey of stores in October and November. PIRG cautioned consumers about toy hazards in four categories:

CHOKING HAZARDS:

Choking on small toy parts, balloons and small balls continues to be the leading cause of toy-related deaths. According to the Consumer Product Safety Commission (CPSC), at least 190 children died between 1990 and 1999 playing with toys. In 1999 alone, 16 children died playing with toys, nine of those from choking, and an estimated 152,600 people went to the emergency room for toy-related injuries. Nearly half of those treated in emergency rooms, 69,600, were under five years old. One tragic example was the death of a 5-month-old girl in El Paso, Texas, who choked to death after a small ball from a toy lodged in her throat.

Federal regulations ban any toy that poses a choking hazard because of small parts if it has “play value” for children under the age of three, regardless of any age labeling to the contrary. The group also warned parents of the heightened choking hazards associated with small balls. Small balls (from a diameter of 1.25” to 1.75 inches) are banned for sale for children under 3.

“Tragically, children choke to death on balls that are small enough to be put in the mouth and block the airway,” added Weintraub.

BALLOONS

Fifty-six children have choked to death on parts of balloons since 1990. PIRG criticized retailers for marketing balloons with toddler icons such as Winnie the Pooh or with “Baby’s First Birthday” messages.

“Balloons are the leading choking killer,” said Rachel Weintraub. “Because of the choking hazard, balloons are inappropriate for toddlers. Consumers should avoid balloons altogether for children under 8, and even then use extreme caution,” continued Weintraub.

TOXIC TOYS

The group warned consumers of toys containing toxic chemicals known as phthalates that are added to polyvinyl chloride (PVC) plastic toys as a softener. The chemicals are linked to liver and kidney damage, are probable human carcinogens, and have already been banned by several European countries in toys for children under three because exposure to toxic chemicals is especially dangerous to small children.

“It is outrageous that a scientist who buys a bottle of phthalate chemicals receives a full hazard warning, but a consumer buying a mouthing toy with phthalates often finds it labeled non-toxic,” added Weintraub. “Young children should not be chewing on toxic toys.”

SCOOTERS

U.S. PIRG also offered tips to consumers about the use of scooters. The popular scooters, which went onto the U.S. market last year, have been responsible for over 26,000 injuries and two deaths (one 6-year-old, one adult) so far in 2000, according to the most recent data from the CPSC. U.S. PIRG joins the CPSC in their recommendations for avoiding scooter injuries. Scooter users should wear proper safety gear including a helmet that meets CPSC’s standard, and knee and elbow pads as well as wrist guards, ride scooters only on smooth, paved surfaces without any traffic, and not ride scooters at night.

WARNING ON INTERNET PURCHASES

Online toy sales grew from \$45 million in 1998 to \$425 million in 1999. Recognizing the growing numbers of toys purchased over the internet, the group urged toygivers to be cautious about buying toys on-line. “While the internet offers consumers the convenience of avoiding crowded toy stores and the possibility of making a purchase at anytime of the day or night, internet purchasers probably won’t see child safety choke hazard warnings that toy packaging must by law prominently display,” said Rachel Weintraub. PIRG urged manufacturers to voluntarily provide Child Safety Protection Act warnings on the web.

“Shoppers should examine all toys carefully for hidden dangers before they make a purchase and should think about how a child actually plays with toys,” Weintraub added. “While most manufacturers comply with the law, parents should not assume that all toys on store shelves this holiday shopping season are either safe or adequately labeled,” continued Weintraub.

“Consumers should get our “Tips for Toy Safety” from our web site, www.toysafety.net before they shop for toys this season.”

-30-

U.S. PIRG is the national lobbying office for state-based Public Interest Research Groups across the country. The state PIRGs are independent, non-profit, non-partisan public interest advocacy organizations. <<http://www.pirg.org>>

The full report is available for \$30 from The State PIRGs, 218 D St. SE, Washington, D.C. 20003 or on the state PIRG toy safety web site, <<http://www.toysafety.net/>>. Send e-mail to "uspig@pirg.org" for more information about PIRG consumer watchdog programs.