

School is out for break and the buzz of play with building sets, models, remote control trucks, computer games, and various other electronic toys can, at times, be a bit overwhelming. My boys are enjoying the snow with some sledding and sliding, as well. The challenge for me is to ensure that they are playing safely and with safe toys as they bounce from one activity to another. Revisiting toy safety and safe play seem to be relevant topics for this time of year.

#### Toy Safety:

Here are some basic tips for us to use as we parent and/or work with children:

- 1) Balloons are a favorite among children of all ages but pose a significant risk of suffocation for children 8 and under, especially if they are deflated. Discard popped balloons immediately and keep deflated balloons out of the reach of young children.
- 2) The high-bounce rubber balls are fun for kids, but also pose a choking hazard for small children. Small parts from building sets, board games, and various other toys are especially dangerous for children under the age of three.
- 3) There are many trendy toys that contain high powered magnets. Although these toys promote creativity and problem solving they should be kept away from children under the age of 14.
- 4) The media has been working hard to create a significant increase in awareness about concussions children can experience in organized athletic competition. That same concern should exist for all types of play children engage in. Make sure children are using appropriately fitted helmets and safety gear when using bikes, scooters, skateboards, and skates.

Keeping our home safe during the entire year, but is especially critical during the holiday season full of excitement and high levels of youthful energy. Immediately discard any plastic wrap and ties that were used to package the item after the toy has been opened. Even the ribbons from the wrapping can create a hazard and should be moved out of the reach of children. Make sure children are playing with toys that are appropriate to their age. I know this sounds easier than it is, as I have three young children in my home, but I must make sure that our youngest child is kept clear of the magnetic toy system our oldest child received. Providing rechargeable batteries for the toys is a great approach to reducing unnecessary waste, but the recharging process should be handled by teenagers and adults. The charger poses an electrical shock hazard for younger children. I also encourage you to look for battery rechargers that have an automatic shutoff once the batteries are fully charged. This reduces additional wasted energy as well as reduces fire hazards in the home.

One of the best sources for current and accurate information on toy safety comes from the U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission (CPSC). This group is responsible, in part, for maintaining our country's toy safety system by requiring testing from third party laboratories around the world. Testing done on toys include checking for lead and phthalates (chemicals used to make plastics more durable and flexible. The CPSC

is also responsible for enforcing rigorous standards for toy safety while also stopping the import of volatile and dangerous toys into the American market from other countries. "In fiscal year 2013, CPSC issued only 31 toy recalls, none of which involved a lead violation. This compares with 172 toy recalls in fiscal year 2008 (19 of which were due to excessive lead); 50 recalls in 2009 (14 for lead); 46 recalls in fiscal year 2010 (3 for lead); 34 recalls in 2011 (4 for lead); and 38 recalls in 2012 (3 for lead). The majority of toy recalls announced last year involved ingestion hazards, including chemical and magnetic dangers." (cpsc.gov) For the most recent information on recalls on toys and other products, you can access the current and archived recalls at: <http://www.cpsc.gov/en/Recalls/>

#### Safe Play:

- Teach children to keep the play area as clear as possible. They should put away toys when they are finished playing with them before they get out a new toy. Anyone with children in their home know how painful it is to step on a toy with sharp edges. That same toy will hurt the feet of children, as well.
- Throw away broken toys. Make sure you remove any batteries they may contain to use for another purpose (if they still have charge), or to discard of safely.
- Keep toys clean. There are antibacterial commercial sprays available that will disinfect the surfaces of toys. Using mild detergent mixed with hot water in a spray bottle followed by rinsing is another option for cleaning toys.
- Have children take turns. My youngest child has a TV game that requires the player to stand with the controls in his hand in order to move the car on the screen. All three of my kids love to play the game and constantly think it is their turn. I removed to controversy by using my kitchen timer to make sure they all get their fair turn. They can watch the timer count down the minutes so that they know when they get their turn. However, I have very smart kids and have learned that I must be in charge of setting the timer, not them. I use marbles to identify which child gets to go first in the day's rotation. Each child has an assigned marble color and I draw a marble from the cup to determine who goes first, then second, and so forth.

Information for segments this article was retrieved from <http://www.cpsc.gov> and from Health Hints – Toy Safety, Vol. 14, No. 1 published by the Texas A&M AgriLife Extension Service. If you have more questions about toy safety and age-appropriate toy selection, feel free to contact me at the Geary County Extension office, 785-238-4161. Until next time, keep living resourcefully!