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Getting the lead out of toys

By Tom Watson

Special to The Seattle Times

This year's unprecedented toy recalls give new meaning to the term "educational toys."

The recalls since June of more than 4 million toys with lead paint — from certain Winnie the Pooh play sets to some Barbie accessories — have educated many local parents, causing them to rethink their approach to toys.

Susan and Dace Campbell, of Seattle's Queen Anne neighborhood, for example, now make many toys themselves for 1-year-old son Arlan. They keep it simple, making blocks from old boxes covered with contact paper, or creating rolling toys made from oatmeal containers. Their son often adds his own touch with stickers.

In addition to knowing where their toys came from, Susan Campbell says it also forces them to be creative.

Toxic toy story

But parents still buy toys, and they need to let family and friends know which types of toys to buy for their kids as gifts. Where do they turn?



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Susan Campbell and her son Arlan Campbell, 1, demonstrate how much fun they can have with a cardboard "Peek-a-Boo" box. She simply cuts out partial shapes in the sides of the box, lines it with a blanket and places her son inside for endless "peek-a-boo" games.

The problem isn't necessarily that the recalled toys were made in China, according to Jude LaRene, co-owner of Izilla Toys on Capitol Hill. Rather, the critical factors are the standards of the toy company with its name on the label, the ability of that company to ensure the safety of its products, and U.S. and state regulations regarding toys sold in this country.

Independent toy stores may carry some toys from China made according to European regulations, which exceed U.S. regulations for potentially hazardous substances, LaRene said.

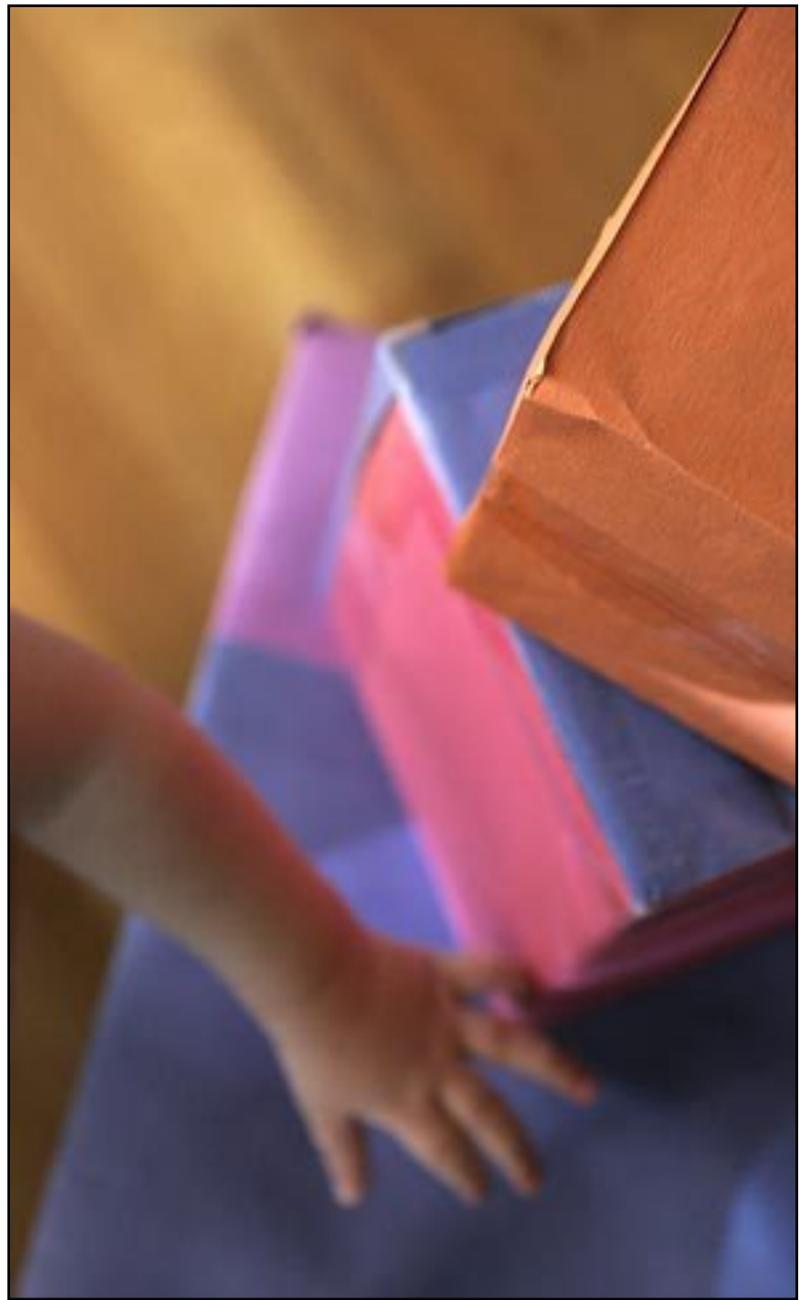
Youngest at most risk

Lead, which can cause developmental disorders, is at a dangerously high level in the bodies of more than 300,000 children in the U. S., according to the Environmental Protection Agency.

Research indicates that children face the greatest lead threats not from toys but from dust and soil with traces of lead, or from peeling lead paint. But because lead accumulates in the body, parents don't want to expose their kids to lead in toys, especially babies or toddlers, who tend to put things in their mouths.

Other toy hazards include small ingestible parts and the presence of phthalates. Often used to soften plastics, phthalates have been linked to hormone problems. Though not the subject of U.S. recalls, phthalates are banned in Europe. On Oct. 14, California became the first state to ban phthalates in products used by children under 3.

Buyer be smart



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Campbell makes blocks for her son out of sturdy cardboard boxes decorated with construction paper.

Lead test kits for home use are not always reliable, says Consumer Reports. Instead, consider toys with less likelihood of hazards. These include unpainted wood toys, balls, washable stuffed animals, board books and nontoxic paints. If you can find toys made from Forest Stewardship Council (FSC) certified wood, that's a green bonus.

Avoid unbranded or "no-name" toys, such as those found in vending machines or at dollar stores. And although reusing toys conserves resources, closely examine used toys to make sure they don't pose safety or health risks.

Closer to home

Since owners and employees of independent toy stores usually are more familiar with their toys than employees of the big-box stores, the independents can often help customers find safer, "greener" toys. The Seattle area boasts more than 20 independent toy stores. Purchasing locally produced toys can also give consumers more confidence about safety. And buying local reduces environmental impacts, since less transportation is required.

Most local toy makers, however, produce relatively few toys and sell them primarily at craft fairs or one or two select stores. The nonprofit Giving Tree (www.givingtreetoys.org) makes wood toys in Seattle that are available at Pike Place Market and several other area locations.

Or, if you have just a bit of time, make some of your own toys, such as the "lava lamp" that Susan Campbell recently made using an old plastic bottle, vegetable oil, food coloring and small "floaty" objects such as raisins. Use a nontoxic sealant for the cap if needed, she



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advises, and always watch a child while he's playing with this toy.

"The idea is that you can make toys that are fun, engaging and environmentally conscious," she said. "And you don't have to worry about lead paint."

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Campbell created a "Baby Lava Lamp," left, with a plastic bottle, corn syrup, baby oil, food coloring and floating objects, closed tight with a nontoxic sealer. Below is her rattle creation made from a plastic bottle, metallic ribbon, plastic toys, straws, jingle bells and dimes.

Safe toy resources

For toy recalls: www.cpsc.gov/cpsc/pub/prerel/category/toy.html

To learn more about toys and lead: www.cdc.gov/nceh/lead/faq/toys.htm

For age-appropriate toys: www.aap.org/new/toysafety-part2.pdf

For green toys: www.thegreenguide.com/reports/product.mhtml?id=65&sec=3

For homemade toys: www.robbynsnest.com/homemade.htm

Recent toy recalls

KB Toys: Various wood block toys

JCPenney: Winnie-the-Pooh play sets

Kids II: Baby Einstein discover and play color blocks

Target: Happy Giddy Gardening Tools and Children's Sunny Patch Chairs

RC2 Corp.: Various Thomas and Friends Wooden Railway Toys

Mattel: Various Barbie Accessory Toys

Source: U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission. For a full recall list, go to www.cpsc.gov/cpscpub/prereel/category/toy.html