

What to get the kids? Think outside the toy box

You can find non-toxic dolls and cars, but there are other options, too

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Dangerous dolls, trains and other lead-tainted toys. Beads that metabolize into "date-rape" drugs. It's enough to ruin Christmas for any parent stressing over what's left to buy the tots this year.

After the U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission's recall of these and many other toys, moms like Stephanie Gonzalez just don't know what to think. "I'm assuming this is mostly about China," says Gonzalez, who lives in the Los Angeles area. "They must be using the most low-cost, bad-for-you products and chemicals because everything is so cheap."

A common sentiment perhaps, but experts warn that avoiding products made in China is not a foolproof strategy.

"The country where a toy is being manufactured isn't the sole problem," says James Swartz, director of World Against Toys Causing Harm (WATCH), a group that has been presenting annual worst-toy lists for the past 35 years. More than 80 percent of the toys on the market are made in China and many are fine, he says. "Also it would be a mistake to assume a product is safe just because it's made here in the United States or in Europe."

WATCH's Web site offers examples of risky toys. At the [Consumer Product Safety Commission Web site](#) parents can check out which specific toys have been recalled, read toy safety tips and sign up to receive e-mail notification of recalls. Tips, a blog and more toy safety info can be found at [Safety Mom](#).

Parents should also let this year's toy caution serve as a reminder that we really should be buying less and keeping the holidays simple and family-focused.

Dr. James R. Roberts, an associate professor of pediatrics at the Medical University of South Carolina, recommends a back-to-basic approach this Christmas. "Forget the toys," he says. "Get your kids bike helmets this year and get them outside on bikes."

"Buy an age-appropriate game and then play it together," urges Dr. Helen Binns, a professor of pediatrics at Northwestern University and spokesperson for the American Academy of Pediatrics.

Here are some other gift ideas if you are thinking outside the toy box this holiday season:

Adventures

Gift memberships to the zoo, children's museum or aquarium promise kids of all ages plenty of fun-filled afternoons.

Or maybe you could plan a holiday trip. The Mancinos of Illinois are taking a trip to Arizona instead of exchanging vast quantities of gifts. "Instead of sleigh rides we'll do jeep rides. Instead of skiing, we'll go hiking," says mom Renee Mancino.

Another idea for school-age kids: camping gear and a "gift certificate" for a family camping trip later in the year. Be prepared to pitch the tent in your living room Christmas day.

Books

"Kids always love pop-ups by Robert Sabuda and Matthew Reinhart," says Mary Taft, a mom and bookseller in the children's department at Prairie Lights Bookstore in Iowa City, Iowa. Pop-ups are particularly popular with the preschool set.

She also recommends a new book called "Gallop!" by Rufus Butler Seder. "Gallop!" uses a technique called scanimation that's never been used before," says Taft. A cat springs, a butterfly flutters and, yes, a horse gallops. "Everyone – kids and adults – will enjoy this book. I even had to get one for myself."

Books about your children's favorite characters are also fine. Charlie & Lola for the preschoolers and Transformers and Spider Man for the older kids may not be considered great children's literature but Taft says she sees nothing wrong with this reading material. "It's appropriate to use the child's interest in selecting books," she says. "Maybe this isn't all they read but it can certainly be part of it."

Cooking gear

Kids — preschoolers on up — love to cook. Try an apron, cooking utensils and children's recipe book such as "The Pink Princess Cookbook" or "Betty Crocker's Kids Cook!"

Music for little ears

Grandma Susan Mosher has found that relaxation CDs are a big hit. "I bought two CDs — "Discovering Your Special Place" and "Magic Garden & Healing Pond" [by psychologist Charlotte Reznick] — for my 8-year-old grandson," says Mosher, who lives in Chicago.

"Sometimes he giggles over segments in the relaxation part that say to body parts, 'I love you, feet!' etc.," she says, "but he listens all the way through every night as part of his routine and he really enjoys it."

Other great CD picks for young children include Dan Zanes' house party music and the audio recording of children's poet Shel Silverstein's "Where the Sidewalk Ends." Dora the Explorer lovers will appreciate "Professor Pocket's Sing Spanish Speak Spanish" (for ages 2 and up).

A laptop, and a lesson in giving

For \$399 (of which \$200 is a tax-deductible donation), [One Laptop Per Child](#) will send a laptop to a child in a developing nation and one to your star student.

Art supplies

"I'm going with good old art supplies and dress-up kits," says California mom Gonzalez. "Those seem safe and I like to get my daughter gifts that get the creative juices flowing." Take note, though: Pigments in cheaper crayons may be lead-contaminated so Roberts recommends looking for supplies with the American Consumer Product Safety Council label.

The toy fiasco surely is causing parents grief this year, but pediatrician Binns urges moms and dads to not stress too much about what's under the tree.

"What your child needs most is you," she says. "Your interaction with your child is the key here. Not the toys."

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