

Toying with disaster

by the St. Louis Post-Dispatch

Harried parents stalking toy store aisles for the season's "must-have" present can be forgiven for not recognizing the difference between 1,4-butanediol and 1,4-pentanediol. For those who don't, it's about \$6,900 a metric ton - and the safety of your children.

One of those chemicals, 1,4-pentanediol, is a nontoxic ingredient in glue. It cost \$9,700 a metric ton last week. The other is a considerably less expensive industrial solvent that when ingested metabolizes into the "date rape drug" GHB.

To cut corners, a Chinese toy maker apparently used the less expensive industrial solvent when mixing up a popular children's toy called Aqua Dots. They're little pellets that can be formed into various shapes.

Some of those little pellets ended up in the mouths of kids, which is hardly a surprise. Five kids, two in the U.S. and three in Australia, have been hospitalized as a result.

Now, just weeks before Christmas, one of the season's hottest toys is being taken off store shelves on two continents. Parents, shaken by seven months of recalls that include popular toys like Barbie, Polly Pockets and Thomas the Train, are wondering if the gifts they give this year will be popular or poisonous. And both the president and Congress are talking about improving consumer safety.

It's about time. The time to protect Americans is before unsafe products get into circulation.

President George W. Bush last week called for stepped up inspections of the riskiest imports, some conducted overseas, and steeper fines for violators. The president's plan would also give the U.S. Food and Drug Administration authority to order recalls of tainted food.

That's also the broad outline of earlier proposals by Congress. It represents a sea change from the lax regulatory attitude Bush has previously displayed. He's reliably championed reduced regulation and industry self-policing - to the point that many of the people he appointed to head federal agencies came from the industries they regulate.

Just two weeks ago, the acting chairwoman of the Consumer Products Safety Commission, former corporate lawyer Nancy Nord, told Congress that she opposed a plan to increase her agency's budget and responsibilities.

Nord has acknowledged taking thousands of dollars in travel expenses from companies with business before the CPSC. She's told interviewers that frequent recalls in recent months are evidence the safety system is working.

In fact, the Aqua Dots fiasco is eerily similar to well-publicized recalls of pet food earlier this year. In that case, the cheaper ingredient substituted by a cost-cutting supplier was melamine.

It will take more than tougher laws and increased budgets to protect American consumers. It will also take agency heads committed to the idea that robust markets require regulatory oversight - something neither Nord nor Bush have so far demonstrated.

Until that happens, the motto for consumers is caveat emptor. And remember, just six shopping weeks until Christmas.

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