

Naughty or nice: putting Chinese toys to the test

by Jane Clifford

Isabela Montana rocked her baby doll, providing comfort as only a 2-year-old can. Then she leaned down and kissed the doll's face, demonstrating the same kind of love her parents, Luis and Monica Montana, show her.

MISSED LEAD? - Isabela Montana, 2, loves her dolls, but her parents worry about her kissing them, given the increasing reports of recalled toys due to excessive lead in their painted surfaces. CNS Photo by Eduardo Contreras. TOY FEAR - Justin Foster, 6, watched as his mom, Colleen Kennedy, tested a toy in the playroom with a LeadCheck swab. CNS Photo by Scott Linnett. But Monica Montana has mixed feelings these days about her daughter's compassion.

"She's at that stage where she's kissing the dolls' faces," Montana said recently, while watching her daughter play in the family's home. "I'm a little worried."

As are many parents and grandparents, given the millions of toys recalled in the past few months. The toys - from big names including Mattel and Fisher Price and featuring favorite characters such as Thomas the Tank Engine and Sesame Street characters - all were manufactured in China and imported with excessive levels of lead in their paint.

And it's not just toys. Also recalled were plastic bibs, vinyl lunch boxes and dress-up jewelry. The death of a Minnesota 4-year-old reportedly was due to swallowing a piece of a Reebok heart-shaped charm bracelet, a free gift "with purchase." The company voluntarily recalled the bracelets found to have excessive lead that leached out of the item, poisoning the child.

And it's not just lead. In April, the Consumer Product Safety Commission and the owner of Rose Art Industries, announced an expanded recall of Magnetix building sets due to one death, one aspiration and 27 intestinal injuries in children who swallowed tiny, powerful magnets that can attract each other inside the intestines.

Recently, the CPSC and Canadian toy company Spin Master announced a voluntary recall of Aqua Dots, another Chinese-made toy, due to a coating on the small craft beads that contains a chemical that can cause unconsciousness, seizures, drowsiness, coma and death when eaten. Two American and three Australian children were hospitalized.

As the huge holiday toy-buying season approaches, worried families wonder what to do. An estimated 80 percent of toys sold in the United States are made in China. The CPSC, charged with making sure such dangerous products don't find their way to American shelves, is under investigation by Congress. Toy companies, and some retailers like Toys "R" Us and Wal-Mart, still are recalling their products.

Stay-at-home father Scott Robinson said, "It's alarming."

Sitting on the couch in their suburban home, his wife, Cindy, said, "It's infuriating. The Chinese people are given a job to do. It's not their fault. The people responsible are the Mattels, the Fisher Prices - Let's face it, it all boils down to profits. And the funny thing is that this is something that's going to cost them millions. And who's going to pay? The American consumer."

She paused, then spoke again, anger in her voice.

"We trust the government to test these things before they come over."

Some families have turned to testing their own toys.

Colleen Kennedy was sure that many of her children's toys have undetected lead.

"About 95 percent of the toys in this room were made in China," the San Diego mom said, gesturing to the neatly organized playthings Justin, 6, and Amanda, 4, entertain themselves with in the sunny family room.

Kennedy's family was one of three around the county who agreed to test some of their children's toys with an at-home kit designed to spot lead. Despite recent released reports that test results are inconsistent and not always reliable, the kits are in strong demand, according to clerks at Home Depot and Lowe's.

Kennedy has returned several Thomas the Tank Engine trains and, ironically, one of the replacement toys also was recalled, so she was happy to use a lead test kit.

One afternoon last month, she selected several toys. The first hurdle was activating the kit, which requires considerable pressure to release a liquid containing a nontoxic chemical. She shook the cylinder twice, oozed a little of the yellow liquid out to the spongy top and swabbed an oversized ring that Amanda had chosen as a prize at a Chuck E. Cheese. Kennedy rubbed the silver painted surface for the required 30 seconds and stopped. The spongy tip was still yellow. No traces of pink or red, which indicate the presence of lead. She repeated the process for 15 toys and was a little skeptical when only one - a wooden bead - showed a hint of lead in its red paint.

The Montanas had the same reaction when a dozen or so items, including a backpack, dolls and more tested "clean."

The Robinsons, too, were surprised after testing toys in their family room. Hearing that paint on pottery from Mexico is often a problem, Cindy wanted to test a chip-and-dip set her father brought back from Mexico. "Wow, that was instantaneous," Cindy Robinson said when the test kit sponge turned bright red after only seconds of swabbing a terra-cotta-colored bowl. "OK, those are going in the trash."

Visibly shaken, the couple talked about using the set a couple of times a year for parties.

"I was told that if the pottery was glazed, it was OK," Cindy Robinson said, her hand frozen in mid-swab. And though that test seemed to give them confidence that the kits work, they couldn't transfer that feeling to toys, especially those that 7-month-old Lauren puts in her mouth every day. Like Kennedy, the Robinsons have removed some of their son's toys after they were recalled. At 4, Ricky doesn't seem to notice, but his parents have explained the situation to him anyway.

"We've talked about how some toys weren't made right, that bad things were used that make babies and little boys sick," Cindy Robinson said.

Kennedy and her husband, David Foster, have told their children the same thing. It's "not very good" having to get rid of some of his toys, Justin Foster said. Then the first-grader shrugged. "But it's better than having lead."

In October, the CPSC released the results of a "special evaluation of consumer lead test kits," noting that the kits tested resulted in false positives and false negatives.

"None of the kits consistently detected lead in products if the lead was covered with a non-leaded coating. Based on the study, consumers should not use lead test kits to evaluate consumer products for potential lead hazards."

Consumer Reports released results of its study the same day and found that three test kits out of five the agency tested, were "useful though limited screening tools," saying, as the CPSC did, that the kits don't detect lead under the surface paint.

Hybrivet, manufacturer of LeadCheck, the test kit used in this story, responded to the CPSC report.

"We're not saying our tests are the be-all and end-all," said Doug Bailey, spokesman for Hybrivet, based in Natick, Mass. "But it's accurate and true 99.9 percent of the time. The CPSC report is somewhat baffling. They don't tell us what they're testing. We don't know anything about their tests.

"Essentially, the CPSC is saying the government doesn't test these toys, the manufacturers don't test the toys, the retailers don't test the toys, and, by God, we don't want consumers testing these toys either."

Bailey said the tests must be done precisely as the directions dictate, and they will only tell that lead is present in an item, but not how much. The only way to know if the lead level is above government-set limits is to have the item tested at a professional lab.

All this leaves families in the lurch.

"We used three separate test sticks on the same toy, and twice the test was positive, and once it was negative," Kennedy wrote in an e-mail. "This makes me question the reliability of the test kits, and I don't think I would purchase them again."

The other alternative is professional lab testing.

"We've seen a marked increase in requests for testing" by importers, retailers and manufacturers, said Derrick Tanner, West Coast Regional Manager of LA Testing, a California's accredited lead laboratory.

Tanner said anyone can come into the lab with an item and request a test. The problem will be cost. Say you want to check a backpack.

"We'll cut a piece of the material for testing," explains Kelley West, the company's California sales manager, "and for a three-day turnaround, it would be \$300."

Time-consuming and clearly expensive for families dealing with hundreds of toys, the professional lab testing is the only thorough test of surface and under-the-surface lead, said Diane Rexin. She is director of the San Diego County branch of the Childhood Lead Poison Prevention program, a state-mandated program created in 1992 to serve children who are lead poisoned, do community outreach and educate health-care providers. In 2006, there were 122 children with lead poisoning in the county, about nine in 10 are 5 or younger, nearly eight in 10 are Hispanic.

Rexin said that is attributed to "the use of the clay pottery, which is not fired to a high enough degree, or long enough so the lead can leach from the glaze. There is a high number of people in Hispanic cultures who use this pottery to cook their food, store their food and serve their food."

With that threat in mind, pediatrician Dr. Matthew Weeks said it's all the more important to warn Hispanic families of the lead in toys: "Lead can do a lot of very bad things."

The dangers, Rexin said, include high blood pressure, reproduction problems, hearing and learning disabilities. The largest threat is from peeling paint in homes and apartments built before the 1978 restrictions on the use of lead paint. But the toy threat is there.

"I think it's appropriate to be concerned," Weeks said. "We post all recall notices in our clinics."

But "there are so many lists, you just can't keep up," Monica Montana said.

Rexin's advice for families: "Maybe if the swabs are used strictly according to the manufacturer's recommendations, the reliability of the result is higher. But if you're concerned, the bottom line is get your child tested (for lead poisoning)." Playing it safe

U.S. families are increasingly jumpy about the barrage of toy recalls. Many are waiting for the next doll shoe to drop, so to speak. They worry about the recalls lists they haven't checked and the recalls yet to come. And they just don't know what to do about the toys they already have.

Here are some tips from experts:

- Above all, says Diane Rexin, a county expert in childhood poison prevention, if you are worried your child might be lead-poisoned, ask your doctor to do a blood test for lead levels.

- After your children play with their toys, make sure they wash their hands.

- If you wish, purchase home-use lead test kits and check your own toys. Follow directions precisely to avoid mistaken results, says Doug Bailey, spokesman for Hybrivet's LeadCheck test kits. You can find out if lead is present, but you will not know if the level is within acceptable limits or dangerously off the charts. Only professional testing - which Bailey says ranges from \$400-\$600 per toy - can tell you that.

- Read the Consumer Product Safety Commission recall reports. You can find them - along with CPSC's evaluation of lead test kits - at cpsc.gov.

- Read the Consumer Reports evaluation of five lead testing kits. You can find it at consumerreports.org. Click on "Babies and Kids" and, on the next page, on "Child Safety" and then, under "Products" on the next

page, click on the lead listings.

- If you find toys with lead through a home testing kit or if you have toys on the recall lists, send them back to the manufacturer. Do not throw them away or give them away (to fall into the hands of another child).

- Don't buy used toys made in China without checking them first.

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