

# Toy safety for pre-school

The Royal Children's Hospital Safety Centre, Melbourne 2008



Toys provide children with hours of fun and stimulation. Some toys are chewed, bitten, pushed and pulled; others are gently handled, kept well beyond childhood years and remembered with great fondness. Either way, selecting the right toy ensures that children get the best out of their toys and that they last for years. Unwise choices may mean that toys are quickly thrown away, break, become expensive to maintain, or result in injury.

Children benefit from toys that challenge and excite them. Most toys serve some purpose, for example to entertain, to educate and develop skills, or to provide exercise. Whatever the reason, aim to select quality toys appropriate to the age of the child. There are some toys that are not suitable for young children. There are so many toys to choose from that you will find ones that suit children of all ages.

## General guidelines when buying toys

Children learn through play. Good toys can assist children to develop mentally and physically.

Good toys are:

- without long strings, cords or loops
- safe, durable and age appropriate without small parts, sharp points or edges
- stable and strong (ride-on toys)
- suited to the child's age, ability, and stage of development.

Good toys have:

- effective brakes on bikes
- strong seams and parts in soft toys and dolls to prevent choking on filling materials or small items

**Read labels on toys** for the recommended age range and instructions about how to use.

Toys that have small parts should not be given to children under 3 years of age. Children of this age sometimes place small parts in their mouth and can choke. As a general rule, any object that fits into a film canister can potentially choke a child under 3 years.

Young children enjoy imaginary games and playing "dress ups". Make sure they do not have access to objects that they can place over their heads, e.g. plastic bags, swimming caps.

**Dispose of plastic bags and film used in packaging carefully** to prevent children putting them into their mouth or over their head and face.

**Check toys regularly** for loose nuts, bolts, and rough edges, broken plastic and splintered wood

**Encourage children to store their toys after use.** Children and adults can fall over toys left lying around the house

Avoid objects that children treat as if they were toys, e.g. knives, scissors, paper clips, hammers and screwdrivers. They need to be kept out of reach of young children.

Balloons are fun to have at birthday parties. Burst rubber balloons unfortunately have been swallowed by young children and resulted in suffocation. Tin foil balloons are safer (but more expensive). Be aware of the risk of rubber balloons and supervise young children. Never tie a rubber balloon onto the side of a cot or pram. Make sure that strings are less than 30cm in length to prevent them from being wrapped around the neck and causing strangulation.

When there are children of different ages you will need to supervise them closely when playing. Toys for older children can attract and sometimes injure younger children.

Provide a safe play area and supervise children. Do not leave it up to older children to supervise younger children.

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## Suitable toys for different ages

### Under 6 months

**At this age** toys will be chewed and sucked and small parts put into the mouth, nose or ears.

**Toy ideas:** Bright, colourful and large toys that provide lots of stimulation and encourage babies to reach out. Washable soft toys, rattles and squeaky toys, chime toys, large strongly strung beads and visual mobiles.

**Beware of:** Toys with sharp edges and internal wires, removable parts and thin brittle plastic.

### 6–12 months

**At this ‘Hand to mouth stage’** curiosity is growing rapidly and everything tends to go in the mouth. Babies will progressively crawl, reach up to furniture, stand and maybe even walk. Toddlers have poor balance and fall easily.

**Toy ideas:** Toys that create interest, that can be stacked and knocked down, e.g. nests of brightly coloured cubes, bath toys, blocks or cuddly toys.

**Beware of:** Teething rings containing liquid; polystyrene pellets used as fillers in toys, beanbags or in Christmas decorations as these can be inhaled and block breathing. Mobiles hung above a cot should be well out of reach, as should rubber balloons.

### 1–2 years

**At this ‘Mobile stage’** toddlers are keen to explore and see how objects work. They may have poor balance and fall easily. Appreciation of danger is limited and children are constantly on the move. Lots of objects still go into the mouth.

**Toy ideas:** Toys that can be pushed, pressed and pulled, or fit inside each other, e.g. building blocks, ride-on toys, push-pull toys, posting boxes, picture books, toy telephones, wooden jigsaws, peg boards, buckets and spades.

**Beware of:** Unstable sit-on toys, marbles, coins, beads and strings attached to toys.

### 2–3 years

**At this ‘Exploratory stage’** children like to copy adults but lack understanding and coordination skills. Children climb but do not appreciate height, distance or the risk of falling. They move quickly and will jump without fear.

**Toy ideas:** Toys that stimulate and help to develop hand-eye coordination, e.g. building sets and stacking toys, sand boxes, jumbo crayons, chalk and blackboards, toy musical instruments, skittles, toy wheelbarrows or cars.

**Beware of:** Household items such as sewing machines, irons, garage tools, items with hinges and folding mechanisms that can catch little fingers and self-retracting pull strings.

### 3–4 years

**At this ‘Let’s pretend stage’** children like to play make-believe or pretend games and are starting to learn how to share toys with others. They may respond to discipline and have a desire to please. Parents can gradually replace supervision with education by encouraging or rewarding good behaviour. Parents should remain positive; give plenty of praise and reason with the child. Outdoor play allows children to ‘let off steam’ by running, yelling and squealing. Encourage children to express their feelings and to recognise and accept the way they feel.

**Toy ideas:** Toys that children can use to tell stories and use their imagination e.g. dolls’ houses, children’s furniture, tricycles (with a bicycle helmet), model fire engines and trucks, play dough, dress-up clothing, farm sets, finger puppets and dolls.

**Beware of:** Water toys. Always stay in direct eye contact with children when they are near water.

### 4–5 years

**At this age** physical coordination is improving, as is social, emotional and language development. Children are learning to share, to wait and take turns, rather than pushing and shoving.

**Toy ideas:** Toys that children can share and develop their creativity, e.g. simple educational games, non-toxic clay, paints and plasticine, dominoes, spinning tops, balls, musical instruments, pedal cars, prams, picture puzzles, plastic scissors (with round tips), toy telephones and hand puppets.

**Beware of:** Noisy toys, bows and arrows, guns and projectile toys.

### 5–6 years

**At this age** children like to explore, climb, ride and enjoy rough games. They engage in more social play and their concentration span is lengthening.

**Toy ideas:** Sewing kits, carpentry kits, word or number games, swings with rubber seats, board games and more complex puzzles.

**Beware of:** Kites used near powerlines, flammable adhesive glue in craft kits, chemistry sets and shooting toys.

*Statistics are based on those provided by the Victorian Injury Surveillance Unit, Monash University. Figures have been rounded off for ease of reading.*

### For further information:

- Australian Toy Association Limited  
(03) 9320 2600 or  
[www.austoy.com.au](http://www.austoy.com.au)
- Consumer Affairs Victoria  
1300 558 181 or  
[www.consumer.vic.gov.au](http://www.consumer.vic.gov.au)

For further information  
about the Safety Centre  
Telephone 9345 5085

[www.rch.org.au/safetycentre](http://www.rch.org.au/safetycentre)

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