

Safety Not a Kid's Game

By Reg P. Wydeven
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2007 is a year that marks many anniversary celebrations: it's the 40th anniversary of the debut of 'Star Trek' and the 20th for 'Star Trek: The Next Generation'; the 30th anniversary of 'Star Wars'; and the 25th anniversary of G.I. Joe vs. Cobra.

To commemorate these milestones, celebratory toys are being released. This year, fans can buy a James Kirk action figure in his captain's chair on the bridge of the U.S.S. Enterprise. Star Wars has a 30th anniversary collection of action figures, while G.I. has two 25th anniversary action figure 5-packs.

G.I. Joe is also celebrating its silver anniversary by re-releasing the most iconic action figure of the 1970s – G.I. Joe with the Kung Fu Grip. Allowing him to grasp weapons and other accessories, G.I. Joe's Kung Fu Grip made the Ken doll look like a complete wuss (although the pink cardigan didn't help). But come this holiday season, toy manufacturers are hoping they can get a Kung Fu Grip on the safety of their products.

Reeling from recent recalls of 1.5 million Chinese-made Fisher-Price toys and a staggering 19 million Mattel toys because they contained lead paint, the toy industry is going to great lengths to regain consumer confidence. The Toy Industry Association, a trade group whose 500 members make about 85% of all the toys sold in the U.S., has asked the federal government, at the toy companies' expense, to intervene using a three-pronged safety plan announced September 5.

First is a federal requirement to make safety testing mandatory. Second would be new, industry-wide standards for testing procedures. Finally, independent testing labs must be certified. These labs may devise a logo to be stamped on toys indicating that they meet federal standards.

This new plan is in response to the lead paint scare in popular Sesame Street, Batman, Barbie, Cars and Dora the Explorer toys imported from China, which makes 80% of the world's toys and sells \$20 billion of goods to the U.S. each month. If ingested, lead can lead to long-term developmental and health problems, such as hyperactivity, low IQ and kidney damage.

While most large companies in the U.S. use both internal and third-party testing, there is no legal requirement for testing, uniform testing method or seal of approval for safe toys. Although the U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission sets standards for toy safety, it does not require companies to test and the agency doesn't test the toys itself.

The CPSC was created in 1972 to protect the public against "unreasonable risks" from consumer products that now contribute to 27,000 American deaths and 33 million injuries each year.

Once a manufacturer discovers that a product fails to meet the CPSC's standards, it is legally required to notify the agency within 24 hours. A recall is the only penalty for failing to meet the standards. Recalls are meant to act as a safety valve, or a quick way to get potentially dangerous products off store shelves before they do harm. The CPSC recommends a federal ban on lead exceeding 0.06% by weight.

If a company fails to report problems, the CPSC can fine the company, but only up to \$1.83 million, which critics consider too small as large toy manufacturers can generate daily sales of millions of dollars.

Hopefully by this Christmas, with the help of the government, product safety will be boldly going where no toy has gone before.

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