Don’t fall victim to the hysteria over plastic toys

By ACSH Staff — December 9, 2010

As the holiday decorations go up, so do anxiety levels. In the midst of prepping for the in-laws and the added financial stress of the holidays, the last thing Americans need is another source of unwarranted anxiety.

But just in time for the holidays, Public Interest Research Group (PIRG) released its annual “Trouble in Toyland” report, which preys on parents’ greatest fears by warning shoppers of “toxic” chemicals and other dangers lurking on every toy aisle.

When it comes to protecting their children, parents will do whatever it takes to eliminate the risk of harm. Whether it is buying outlet plugs, fancy cribs, corner cushions or even expensive organic food, we generally strive to be as careful as we can. Unfortunately, reports like “Trouble in Toyland” are designed to cause unnecessary panic and downplay the real dangers kids face.

Many of the alarms about chemicals in toys are not accurately characterized. PIRG has taken to attacking a class of chemicals, called phthalates, which are used to produce soft and flexible plastic toys. Despite decades of use, a longstanding safety record, study after study reassuring their safety, and the government’s seal of approval, special interest groups continue to target phthalates.

The hysteria over plastic toys is casting a dark shadow over the joyous holiday season. Uninformed but vocal activists (like PIRG) are needlessly scaring parents, especially when there are real dangers facing kids. It is time we put these risks into perspective.

Parents should focus their concerns on real and proven risks. Here in the U.S., the leading cause of death among children is motor vehicle-related accidents — many of which can be prevented. In 2009 alone, nearly 1,538 kids died in car-related accidents, averaging around four deaths a day. Statistics also show that motor vehicle-related deaths tend to spike around the holidays due to an increase in drunk driving incidents. Reducing the incidence of drunk and buzzed drinking is something every American should take seriously. Another proven way to protect children from danger is to make sure they get the full complement of vaccinations recommended by the CDC — yet each year thousands of children are sickened — and some die — as a result of infection with preventable childhood diseases.

But what about toy-related deaths? In fact, the number of toy-related deaths in 2009 was 12; that number was actually cut in half from 2007 and 2008. These tragic deaths were in no way related to chemicals, however; they were most likely caused by choking.

Any child death warrants concern, but the best way to protect our children is to focus on actual risks. Reports such as PIRG’s “Trouble in Toyland” have eye-catching names, yet, when we compare toys to car accidents and vaccine-preventable childhood infections, these risks prove to
be virtually non-existent.

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