Toys with lasers have long been one of the coolest options for playtime for young children. They can be used for all sorts of fun activities, such as various imaginative space hero narratives and coveted laser tag outings with friends. But how safe are these lasers? The FDA says that they are more dangerous than we might think.

According to the FDA Consumer Update [2], When operated unsafely, or without certain controls, the highly-concentrated light from lasers - even those in toys - can be dangerous, causing serious eye injuries and even blindness. In their warning, the FDA includes lasers used for aiming toy guns, spinning tops that project light while they spin, handheld lasers (more commonly known as lightsabers), or lasers which create optical effects in the room.

But at what point do these toys become a hazard, and how worried should we be? Dr. Emil Chynn, the medical director and owner of Park Avenue Laser Vision, and long-time scientific advisor to ACSH, told us about his experience with eye injuries due to lasers.

[One] patient was a child playing with his dad's laser pointer. FDA limits the power (in mW) of such lasers, as well as toys, to levels that cannot cause serious eye damage from brief accidental exposure (like looking at it for one second) he said. But extended exposure can in fact be harmful. This unfortunate kid upon questioning admitted to staring into the laser with his eye over the aperture for about ten minutes, Dr. Chynn said. His vision recovered from 20/70 to 20/25 in that eye, but he did suffer one line of permanent visual loss, as well as some color vision in that eye.

ACSH's Dr. Elizabeth Whelan says, When these toys are used as intended, they are perfectly safe. What it really comes down to in the end may be that parents should just pay close attention to their children when playing with these laser toys just to make sure they are being used appropriately.