

How Big Business Has Let Parents Down

by Dr. Jenn Berman



In the past few months, parents have been hit with bad news over and over again.

First we learned the bottles we were using to feed our babies may be harming them, then came the news that so-called "educational videos" are reducing our children's vocabulary; shortly after that, parents were faced with one of the biggest toy recalls in history. If it wasn't clear to parents before, it sure is now: big business is not looking out for the best interest of our kids.

Worried Moms and Dads are trying to figure out what to make of all the information out there and how to protect their children. Here is the real scoop on the recent child-related scares and what parents need to know to protect their children:

Bad Bad BaBas

Earlier this year, a study came out that claimed that popular baby bottles contain a chemical called Bisphenol A (BPA), which leaches into liquids at potentially dangerous levels for babies. Tests of popular bottles like Dr. Brown's, Evenflo, Gerber, and Plater showed dangerously high levels of BPA. As a result, many parents ran out to buy glass bottles or Bisphenol free plastic bottles, like the Born Free brand.

According to Professor Frederick vom Saal, a biologist at the University of Missouri who authored a report on BPA tests of lab rats and mice, the research has shown that even small amounts of exposure to

According to vom Saal, "when, particularly, exposure occurs in fetuses and newborns, you end up with those babies eventually developing prostate cancer, breast cancer. They become hyperactive. They show learning impairment. It's a poster chemical for attention deficit hyperactivity disorder," vom Saal said.

The concern over BPA goes back some time. Two years ago state lawmakers in California, Maryland and Minnesota tried to ban BPA unsuccessfully. Clearly, not everyone believes BPA is such a big problem. The Juvenile Products Manufacturers Association (JPMA), which represents the leading manufacturers of baby bottles in the United States, claims, "there is overwhelming evidence backing the safety of plastic baby bottles." On their website, they report the Food and Drug Administration (FDA) "has confidence that no safety issues exist for BPA in regulated food contact materials. Furthermore, FDA has determined that the use of polycarbonate-based baby bottles and BPA based epoxy coated cans used to hold infant formula is safe."

Many of the organizations that claim that the BPA in bottles is "perfectly safe" stand to lose a lot of money if parents stop buying those bottles. It is especially important that parents read the available information to make the best decisions for their children.

Betrayed By Toy Companies

hitting at least ten recalled toys. In the past few months, millions of toys and baby items have been recalled predominantly [exclusively?] due to high levels of lead and choking hazards. Mattel led the way with recalls of over nine million toys. Other recalls that followed included: children's jewelry, Curious George spinning tops, SpongeBob SquarePants address books, Batman action figures, Thomas the Train train sets and vinyl bibs.

American companies who hire Chinese manufacturers, who are estimated to supply the United States with 80 percent or more of its toys, have had serious manufacturing problems that have parents concerned. One poll done by eBarnstall.com, an online toy company that now does its own lead testing for toys, showed that 67 percent of mothers polled reported that they would not buy any toys manufactured in China in the foreseeable future. These toy recalls have many parents worried about the long term consequences of children who have played with toys that contain unsafe levels of lead in the years prior to the recall. It has been speculated that we may not know the full impact of the problem for years to come.

While most pediatricians perform a verbal questionnaire, as recommended by the American Academy of Pediatrics, to screen children for lead risks at age one and two, many are now being asked to administer blood tests on many of their young patients. Children's Hospital in Los Angeles has seen

the recall. According to the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, any amount of lead greater than nine micrograms per deciliter is unsafe, but new studies suggest that much lower levels – as low as 2.5 micrograms per deciliter – can lower reading and math scores. Many believe that there is no safe level of lead exposure for children, especially the very young. In the early years, the brain is so vulnerable due to the rapid rate of change and development that toxic exposure is of particular concern. Lead exposure can lead to reduced IQ, attention deficit disorder, behavioral problems, and in extreme cases mental retardation or even death.

Baby Einstein, Not So Brilliant After All

The American Academy of Pediatrics strongly recommends that no child under the age of two watch any television. Many parents do not realize that so-called educational videos pose the same risks as television viewing. Parents who are fans of DVDs like "Baby Einstein" and "Brainy Baby" received a rude awakening when a recent study in the *Journal of Pediatrics* revealed that for every hour per day that babies eight to 16 months old were shown "infantainment" such as "Brainy Baby" or "Baby Einstein," they knew six to eight fewer words than other children.

Experts have long known that children benefit most from meaningful interaction with adults. When children view videos they are passive recipients of information and are not truly engaged. Parents who want their children to have large vocabularies and to excel in their studies are best served by engaging their children regularly through reading and speaking with them.

Dr. Susan Linn, the co-founder of the Campaign for a Commercial-Free Childhood has filed a formal complaint with the US Federal Trade Commission accusing the sellers of such DVDs of "false and deceptive marketing." According to Linn, "Not only is there no evidence that baby videos do any of the things the baby video industry claims they do, but these media may actually be undermining the development of the very skills they claim to foster," she said. Until evidence comes out to the contrary, parents are best served by turning off the television, putting away the DVDs and reading to their children.

In conclusion, parents have to realize that we cannot trust big business to look out for our kids. We need to do our due diligence when it comes to research and we must demand that companies that make the products we give to our children provide us with safe products. When they fail us, as they have been, we need to take our business elsewhere.

Dr. Jean Berman is a licensed Marriage and Family Therapist. Her "Dr. Jean" column won the 2005 Parenting Publication of America silver medal for Child Development and Parenting. If you'd like to ask Dr. Jean a question, email

Avoiding Dangerous Toys: What You Can Do

- Make sure younger children do not have access to an older child's toys that could present choking hazards.
- Sign up for email product recall alerts from federal regulators and check sites like recalls.gov.
- Remove any questionable toys.

- Read labels before buying toys.
- Avoid toys made of PVC (polyvinyl chloride) plastic.
- Do not buy any jewelry for young children.
- Have your child tested for lead poisoning.
- Look for non-toxic toys.
- Shop at stores that test toys themselves.
- Avoid toys with small pieces that could present choking hazards.

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