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Dangerous toys not just from China



Recently a lot of people are worried about the hazards kids face from Chinese toys. During the past few months, lead paint has been found in some major brands, and even GHB, an hallucinogenic drug, was found in a product called "Aqua Dots".

About Aqua Dots: Beloved children's toys of old have often allowed youngsters to imitate questionable adult behavior. (See candy cigarettes and those lovably slutty Bratz dolls) But Aqua Dots took it to the next level. The beads were part of a craft kit that was intended to let children create bead designs. But when water (or saliva) was added to the plastic balls, the outside coating actually turned into the powerful date-rape drug GHB.

Sure, it sounds cool. But victims of Aqua Dots could become "comatose, develop respiratory depression, or have seizures." The toxic dots, which were labeled as appropriate for kids ages 4 and up, were recalled in November, halting many untoward games of "doctor" and robbing a generation of young artisans the chemical enhancement they so richly deserve.

But it's not fair to blame dangerous toys on the Chinese, as if they invented the idea. We Americans have a long history of letting the kids play with dangerous toys. Here are a few toys that originated in the United States that make Aqua Dots look pretty safe by comparison:

Nuke Em: A.C. Gilbert was the inventor of the Erector Set. By 1950 he and his company had become the leading manufacturer of chemistry sets and construction sets, which gained wide acclaim at the retail level. Interested in the joy of science and remuneration, Gilbert created the "Atomic Energy Lab U-238." The toy was made to de-mystify the perils of nuclear energy and to encourage the understanding of nuclear science.

Gilbert's "Atomic Energy Lab" was sold for \$50, including the following components: Geiger Counter; Electroscopes to measure radioactivity of different substances; Spinhtharoscope to watch "live" radioactive disintegration; Wilson Cloud Chamber to see paths of electrons & alpha particles at 10k mps; Three low-level radioactive sources (Alpha, Beta, Gamma); Four samples of Uranium-bearing ores; Nuclear Spheres (used to visual build models of molecules); The book "Prospecting for Uranium"; The "Gilbert Atomic Energy Manual"; The comic book "Learn How Dagwood Splits the Atom"; Three Winchester Batteries (size "C"). Suffice it to say that if Saddam had been caught with one of these babies, he'd have been gunned down without a trial.



Kids do the darndest things, but not nuclear physics. The toy was only sold for one year. It's unclear what effects the uranium-bearing ores might have had on those few lucky children who received the set, but exposure to the same isotope—U-238—has been linked to Gulf War syndrome, cancer, leukemia, and lymphoma, among other serious ailments.

Snack time: She might not have been human, but her hunger pains were all too real. "Feed Me!" begged the packaging for 1996's Cabbage Patch Snacktime Kid. And much like the carnivorous Audrey II from Little Shop of Horrors, the adorable lineup of Cabbage Patch snack-dolls appeared at first to be harmless. They merely wanted a nibble – a carrot perhaps, or maybe some yummy pudding. They would stop chewing when snack time was done – they promised. Then they chomped your kid's finger off!



In creating this innovative new toy, the great minds at Mattel devised a motorized mouth that sensed neither pleasure nor pain. It chewed for chewing's sake. With no mechanism to turn off the munching, it was only a matter of time before some kid's hair got caught in the doll's rabid jaws. After 35 fingers and ponytails fell victim, the Snacktime Kids were removed from retail shelves forever, and 500,000 customers were offered a full \$40 refund.

Death from the skies: Galoob Toys predicted big sales for Christmas 1994. With their new Sky Dancer, they would be the first toy company to combine the sparkly femininity of Barbie with the firepower of a bottle rocket. After her reign of terror the Sky Dancer was grounded. When spun aloft, the wings turned into steely-hard child manglers. Hundreds of children fell prey to Sky Dancer's helicopter-blade arms and erratic "Oh-Jesus-it's-chasing-me!" flying patterns. Injuries included scratched corneas and temporary blindness, mild concussions, broken ribs and teeth, and facial lacerations that required stitches. Nearly nine million Sky Dancers were eventually recalled, leaving aspiring ballerinas to earn their battle scars the old fashioned way, with an eating disorder.



Death cocoon: Mini-hammocks seemed innocuous enough. No projectiles, no lead paint, no sharp edges, and no explicit danger. But the Mini-Hammock, often marketed under the name Hang Ten, managed to hang 12.

The product resulted in the fatal and near-fatal asphyxiation of dozens of kids ages 5 to 17. Among the products recalled were Hangouts Baby Hammocks, or "Baby's First Death Cocoon," woven from thin cotton and nylon strings. The culprit was a missing set of "spreader bars" supports meant to keep the hammock open when it was "at ease." Unfortunately, children seeking to spend an afternoon like Gilligan became entangled in the net and strangled to death.

As you can see, the Chinese are not culpable in this matter. It's something we have been doing ourselves for a long time. As a Boy Scout, I had axes, bow and arrows, knives, firestarting devices, and more. Kids have always faced danger – this is nothing new. What is new is the government's response to the hazards caused by the dangerous stuff we're getting from China. Rather than trying to make China clean up their act, our government officials are working behind the scenes to protect Chinese industry.

The current administration is working to reduce the problems caused by dangerous toys being discovered. They have reduced the number of inspectors from 420 to 200. This creates fewer cases in which dangerous toys are discovered. The Bush administration feels that businesses should not be burdened with having to comply with safety regulations. They prefer that the standards remain voluntary. This approach has also helped alleviate the threat dangerous toys pose to the manufacturing industry. Just last month, a ghoulish fake eyeball toy made in China was recalled after it was found to be filled with kerosene. The company was fined \$100.

I actually hope the whole thing gets deregulated so I can buy my grandkids some of the great toys I used to have, like the Johnny Reb toy cannon (with real gunpowder and lead cannonballs); Lawn Darts; and the James Bond 007 Sniper rifle with hard rubber bullets. **BADSAM**

Can we ever really know when our philosophy assignment is due?