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Trouble In Toyland

Parents, Stores More Careful About Imports This Holiday Season

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By LYNN WELCH The Capital Times

Secret Yenta won't be part of the Hanukkah celebration Jennifer Rosen-Heinz and her friends hold with their kids this year.

The decision to exclude gifts for the first time resulted directly from concerns over toy safety following recent recalls of popular brands made in China.

"It's a good wake-up call," the Madison mom said. "The kids have a lot, and we don't need to fill everything with toys."

Toy buyers here have been responding to the situation by doing their own product research, testing playthings with home kits, seeking toys made elsewhere and, in some cases this season, scaling back or eliminating toy purchases.

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Madison toy sellers have also done their homework, finding the country of origin for things they sell and putting in place more stringent tests.

But with more than 80 percent of toys made by companies in China, according to the Toy Industry of America, some parents say it makes sense to ask questions.

"I have a 17-month-old daughter. Everything goes in her mouth - even the toys you wouldn't think of," said Dannelle Gay of Sun Prairie. "I'm not saying all things made in China are bad, but they don't have a good track record."

Even American Girl dolls are made in China.

None of the products sold by the Middleton-based Mattel division has been subject of recent recalls, but many Mattel toys have been part of the voluntary recalls this year.

"A majority of the world's toys are made in China, so it's not a shock," American Girl spokeswoman Julie Parks said of the

company's manufacturing source. "What's important to us is the quality and the aesthetic, and making sure our products remain at the level they are. We have the lowest return rates in the industry at less than 2 percent, which indicates how careful and thoughtful we are in our process."

Madison shops like Capitol Kids have responded to a barrage of questions from customers by getting information on most everything on their shelves. Shelves now have country of origin stickers identifying where each of the store's toys were made.

"People want to do the right thing. We're here to help," said store owner Peg Scholtes.

More pricey, American-made toys such as the Little Engine That Could by Whittle Shortline Railroad have been flying out the door of the Carroll Street shop, making it tough to get some of the in-demand products.

At Learning Train Toys in Sun Prairie, owner Holly Ouellette said she's turning some customers away who insist on buying American-made toys for infants.

"There's a reason stuff is outsourced. We wouldn't be able to provide the quality and quantity for the price if it was made in U.S.A.," Ouellette said.

The local store has been working closely with its vendors to ensure they're safe for customers. Some of Learning Train's biggest sellers from the Thomas & Friends line were subject to recalls late last summer. Those toys have been pulled from shelves. But non-recalled Thomas trains as well as other toys at the shop have been selling well so far this season.

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Playthings owner Nancy Nigl said she's seen a surge in interest for organic things, in addition to U.S.-manufactured goods. Items for babies such as organic teething rings and organic baby apparel have been selling well at her Hilldale toy store.

Firms selling high-end European toys, like Madison's online toy seller Oompa Toys (www.oompatoy.com), have seen a dramatic spike in business. Company CEO Milanie Cleere said she can track a 200 percent leap in sales to the start of toy recalls.

Other companies such as Tupperware have also seen a jump in their toy sales, according to Gay, a charter director with the company. Through its "trusted toys" promotion, Tupperware has refocused part of its business after several years on toys - plastic, laser-printed items such as rattles and mini serving sets made in 100 countries including the U.S., Belgium and Mexico.

Cleere said it's an unfortunate situation that has brought customers to her door.

"People have told me they used to shop at Toys 'R' Us or Target or Wal-Mart and are sick of buying toys that are recalled or fall apart," Cleere said.

Cleere has posted on her blog (www.oompa.com/blog/) video of a recent trip to several German factories which make toys she sells. Oompa is also posting information, when available, on testing complete with safety certificates.

Mattel, too, has added information on its toy testing and stepped-up safety system on its Web site, www.mattel.com, Parks said.

The Toy Industry of America has launched a Web site with safety information at www.toyinfo.org.

Toys "R" Us Inc. Chairman and CEO Gerald L. Storch e-mailed customers in November detailing the company's efforts to ensure toy safety this season. The company has, among other things, hired independent testers from Bureau Veritas to retest products from the store's shelves, according to the message. For more, go to www.Toysrus.com/Safety.

\ Doing research

Chris Wasylyk, an executive team leader at SuperTarget in Fitchburg, said while people have become more diligent about researching which toys they buy before shopping this season, they're still buying.

"People are definitely not afraid to buy toys this year," Wasylyk said, "but they're definitely educating themselves."

Parents with younger children find themselves educating others, too, who give annual gifts to their children.

"My mom will ask if she's going to give something," said Madison mom Jill Pfeiffer. "I feel kind of bad that I've taken the spontaneity out of gift giving."

Others, like Heidi-Rose and Adam Creuziger of Madison, have provided family members with a list of natural and organic toy Web sites and catalogs through which they can order gifts for their 7-week-old daughter.

Gay has a wish list to hand out to relatives who will be buying for her daughter this year.

"It's really raised a lot of people's consciousness," Gay said. "In light of everything that's been going on in the toy world, we're just trying to be really safe and smart this year."

It's important, of course, to not be too worried that everything is unsafe.

"We get caught up in what we should and shouldn't do, and a lot of it is just basic safety and common sense," Nigl said.

Oompa Toys' Cleere sees the level of awareness raised by this year's recalls continuing, especially for parents of children age 3 or younger.

"You have to be able to trust the brand you buy," she said.

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