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It is Christmas shopping as usual for many parents, but speech therapist Melissa Peter tries to stay away from China-made toys for her children, especially when buying for her youngest child, Aaron Zachary Fernandez.

Picture by Rozainah Zakaria

While a large number of China-made toys are being recalled worldwide for toxin contamination, Malaysians shopping for their children's Christmas presents are largely unconcerned, telling TAN CHOE CHOE and AUDREY VIJAINDREN that they believe the authorities are ensuring that toys sold in the country are safe. Are they?

CONSUMERS in America, Australia, New Zealand and the United Kingdom are reportedly jittery about buying toys for their children this Christmas after recalls of China-made toys worldwide due to lead contamination.

But Malaysian parents are unfazed, assuming that the authorities have checked every item on the shelves. If there were any unsafe ones, "they would have already been recalled", says Theresa Fung, a mother of two.

"Especially big toy manufacturers like Mattel. I don't think they would want to make the same mistake twice. So I'm not really worried about buying their toys even if they are made in China."

Nearly seven out of 10 toys you pick up in a toyshop anywhere in the world today are made in China.

In Malaysia, depending on where you shop, you may find almost all the toys on sale come from China.

Does it mean all toys being retailed now are safe for our children?

Not necessarily so, as Domestic Trade and Consumer Affairs Ministry secretary-general Datuk Mohd Zain Mohd Dom said: "It's impossible to perform tests on millions of toys."

He said there were "too many legal implications" that the ministry would have to deal with if its officers were to storm into a retail shop and confiscate products for testing.

To compound the problem, Malaysia does not have any mandatory toy safety standards that manufacturers have to comply with.

"The only other option would be to purchase suspected toys. But, who is going to bear the cost?"

Hence, he urged consumers to come forward with products that they suspected were hazardous.

"We will take it to Sirim (Standards and Industrial Research Institute of Malaysia) for testing. If there is a warranted reason, we will use the Consumer Protection Act to take the product off the shelves."

But this is not a satisfactory answer to consumer protection groups like the Malaysian Association of Standards Users (Masu), an affiliate of the Federation of Malaysian Consumers Associations (Fomca).

"We are very worried. Toy importers and distributors are not obligated or compelled to conduct testing or recall (problematic) toys."

"There's no guarantee that the items being sold to our most vulnerable group of consumers are safe!" said Masu director Ratna Devi Nadarajan.

Her concerns are especially valid, coming as they are after Fomca conducted a random testing of 24 toys from supermarkets and hypermarkets and found 23 of them containing lead on their surface.

Ratna said there was a set of voluntary standards established covering various aspects of toy safety by the Department of Standards Malaysia which has been available since 2002.

But these have never been made mandatory, although the Minister of Domestic Trade and Consumer Affairs has the power to do so.

The standards include the mechanical and physical properties of toys, flammability, safety of chemistry experimental sets, and graphical symbols for age-warning labelling.

"They were adopted from international standards and are free for use by any manufacturer, importer or distributor located in any part of the world," said standards director of the Department of Standards, Rajinder Raj.

The Department of Standards provides advice to regulatory agencies in the incorporation of standards into technical regulations.

Mohd Zain, who only took

office in February, admitted that his ministry had been slow in dealing with the issue of toy safety.<br /><br /> "But we are working with Sirim and other relevant parties to ensure the process is fast tracked. Hopefully the standards will be made mandatory by next year." <br /><br /> The Consumers Association of Penang says not only toys but also all children's products should be of concern.<br /><br /> "There is a need for mandatory safety and labelling standards, to ensure children's products have been checked and comply with the set standards," said CAP president S. M. Mohamed Idris.<br /><br /> He said now would be a good time to examine the trend of depending too much on commercially manufactured toys. <br /><br /> "Children should be encouraged to create their own toys and games from regular items -- like using wooden spoons as playthings." <br /><br /> Unsafe and toxic packaging, he said, was another issue that should be looked into.<br /><br /> Meanwhile, sales of toys are booming. <br /><br /> "Other than a few enquiries we've received from customers buying toys for those under the 'age 1 and below' category, business is brisk as usual at this time of the year," said a supervisor of a top toy chain in Kuala Lumpur who declined to be named. <br /><br /> Mattel's sales, which mainly constitutes China-made products here, also continue to be strong. <br /><br /> Even the news of six children in Australia slipping into a coma after swallowing China-made toy beads coated with a substance similar to the liquid psychotropic drug Ecstasy, has not affected the shopping frenzy here.<br /><br /> "I would say that consumers are not shying away from our products," said Mattel Southeast Asia marketing manager, Cheok Ching Won.<br /><br /> Some parents, like housewife Stephanie Ng, 35, feel the issue of the safety of China-made toys has been blown out of proportion.<br /><br /> "I think everyone's just making a big fuss. China has been making so many products for so many years, why did such safety issues surface only recently?<br /><br /> "I think it's a big conspiracy to discredit China-made products."

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