

Toys for Young Children: No Place for DINP

Soft toys made from polyvinylchloride (PVC) plastic can contain di-isononyl phthalate (DINP), a chemical that makes hard plastic more pliable and that is known to damage the liver and kidneys. When children put soft PVC toys in their mouths, they swallow DINP that leaches from the plastic. Opponents of banning DINP from toys have pointed to a 2002 decision by the Consumer Product Safety Commission that declined to impose a mandatory ban on DINP. Policymakers should examine the decision more closely, however, before endorsing its conclusions. The decision rests on a dubious estimate of how much time children spend mouthing toys.

In November 1998, 12 environmental and public health organizations petitioned the Consumer Product Safety Commission (CPSC) to remove DINP from all toys intended for children up to age five. They also asked for a national health advisory on these products. After extensive press coverage, CPSC and U.S. toy manufacturers voluntarily agreed in December 1998 to remove DINP from toys intended for the mouth while CPSC studied potential risk to children from soft PVC toys.

A scientific advisory panel convened by the CPSC completed its review in 2002 and found that that DINP was actually more toxic than previously thought. They even lowered the maximum amount of DINP that could be consumed without potential health effects – called the “acceptable daily intake” – by 20 percent, despite chemical industry requests to raise the level.¹ The CPSC also confirmed that DINP leaches from the toys through children’s mouthing. Based on measurements of the rate of leaching they concluded that children would exceed the acceptable daily intake after 75 minutes of mouthing vinyl toys.

To the average person these facts alone might suggest that it would be prudent to ban these chemicals from toys. Instead, the CPSC chose to conduct a “behavioral observation analysis.” In the commission’s description: “One hundred and sixty nine (169) children between ages 3 and 36 months were observed by trained observers for a total of four hours, two hours on each of two days. The mean daily mouthing time of soft plastic toys for children 12-24 months of age (the age group with the highest mouthing time) was 1.9 (1.2 to 2.6) minutes/day.” On the strength of this observation, the CPSC concluded that there was no risk from the vinyl toys.

In considering whether to include DINP in a potential ban on phthalates in toys, policymakers should ask themselves whether they share the certainty that this study accurately predicts the behavior of millions of toddlers across the country. How many vinyl toys were available in these homes? Could the voluntary agreement to restrict such toys have affected their availability? Does anyone really believe that a toddler with ready access to a bright, shiny soft plastic toy will only suck on it for 1.9 minutes? The absurdity of basing children’s health on such assumptions underscores the wisdom and urgency of removing DINP from toys intended for young children.

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¹ Consumer Product Protection Commission, *Petition Requesting Ban of Use of PVC Products* (parts 1-7), <www.cpsc.gov/library/foia/foia02/brief/briefing.html>.