

A new threat this shopping season: toys that can spy on kids



A doll called "My Friend Cayla" presents privacy concerns because of its unsecured Bluetooth connection and ability to record audio, according to consumer advocates who on Tuesday released their annual "Trouble in Toyland" report ahead of the holiday shopping season. [DIRK SHADD | Times]



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ST. PETERSBURG — Not all sinister toys are as obvious as a Chucky doll. Many present more subtle threats — choking hazards, high lead content, privacy concerns. And as the biggest shopping season of the year kicks off, consumer advocates are urging shoppers to be judicious when choosing gifts for children this year.

"The message is clear," said Susan McGrath, CEO of the Florida Consumer Action Network. "We need to protect our youngest consumers from unsafe toys."

The U.S. Public Interest Research Group released its annual "Trouble in Toyland" report Tuesday, pinpointing hazardous toys.

Many concerns raised in the report are familiar. Choking hazards are a chief concern. One rule of thumb is that anything that can fit through a toilet paper tube presents a choking hazard, said Petra Vybiralova, supervisor for the Florida Suncoast Safe Kids Coalition. That includes balloons, small toy pieces, batteries and magnets.

Another issue is products with high lead content. Target recently removed two fidget spinners from its shelves — the "Fidget Wild Premium Spinner Metal" and the "Fidget Wild Premium Spinner Brass" — after tests showed each contained significantly more lead than is legally allowed.

But one of the biggest safety concerns consumers face this year may not be so obvious — connected toys.

Toys with wireless connections, such as WiFi or Bluetooth, are becoming increasingly popular because they can respond and interact with children. Some can record sound — such as conversations or a child's name — as well as video or GPS location.

But many times companies don't conduct thorough security testing, which can help ensure there are minimal privacy concerns and that the toys are compliant with data collection and use laws. That can result in toys going to market with unsecured connections, allowing anyone with the technical know-how to connect to and access the toy.

"The collection of a child's personal information combined with a toy's ability to connect to the Internet or other devices through Bluetooth causes concerns for both privacy and physical safety," FCAN's McGrath said.



The FBI shares those concerns. In July, the agency issued a consumer notice about Internet-connected toys and the data the toys and their manufacturers collect.

"The exposure of such information could create opportunities for child identity fraud," the notice said. "Additionally, the potential misuse of sensitive data such as GPS location information, visual identifiers from pictures or videos and known interests to garner trust from a child could present exploitation risks."

One toy that came under fire for privacy concerns was the "My Friend Cayla" doll. It listens to the person playing with it and can respond and interact.

The Electronic Privacy Information Center, a consumer privacy group, filed a complaint with the Federal Trade Commission in 2016 about connected toys including Cayla, arguing that they're benignly packaged surveillance devices if there aren't adequate protections.

"The toys subject young children to ongoing surveillance and are deployed in homes across the U.S. without any meaningful data protection standards," the complaint read. "They pose an imminent and immediate threat to the safety and security of children in the U.S."

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