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# When Lead Lurks in Your Nursery

By CLAUDIA WALLIS

Thursday, Sep. 06, 2007



ENLARGE PHOTO

Angelique and Robby LeDoux with their 22-month-old daughter, Jade, in their apartment in New York City on August 27, 2007.

R. JEROME FERRARO FOR TIME

Angelique and Robby Ledoux freaked when they found three recalled toys among their daughter's playthings. The New York City couple had already been through the pet-food recall with their cat last March, and they'd tossed out suspect tubes of imported toothpaste after a recall in June. This was worse. "At 22 months, Jade still sometimes sucks on her toys," says Angelique. So the LeDouxes sprang into action. Robby bought lead-testing kits the next day and screened every toy in the nursery. Angelique arranged for Jade to get a blood test for lead poisoning.

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The toy recalls have triggered a wave of phone calls from other worried parents and pediatricians, according to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). But whether more kids actually have elevated blood levels of lead won't be known until October at the earliest, when the CDC updates its quarterly data. High levels of lead interfere with the development of a child's nervous system. Lead can cause cognitive losses, learning disabilities, behavioral problems, delayed growth and seizures.

The most common source of elevated lead in American children isn't toys; it's old paint chipping off the walls in houses built before 1978, when paint containing the metal was banned in the U.S. Lead paint is loaded with up to 50% lead by weight, and that could go for paint used on the

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recalled toys too.

Parents should immediately remove any toy containing lead, says Dr. Helen Binns, a Chicago pediatrician who chairs the American Academy of Pediatrics' Committee on Environmental Health. If parents are concerned or if toys are peeling or chipping, she recommends a blood test. The average lead level in the U.S. is 2 mcg/dL of blood. A level of 10 or higher calls for serious action: health officials will work with parents to reduce exposure and check their child's iron, as being low in iron increases the body's absorption of lead. Some city health departments do this kind of workup for any child with a level over 5.

The CDC is spearheading a federal task force, which includes the Commerce Department and Consumer Product Safety Commission, focusing on how to control the lead hazard in imported toys and other consumer products. In the meantime, Binns hopes that looking at toys will serve as "a good prompt to look at your entire home." Research shows that 2 out of 3 homes built before 1940 have lead in a hazardous condition.

The LeDouxes have certainly gotten their wake-up call. Jade's blood test was fine, but the couple no longer trusts the toy industry--or federal regulators--to police its products. They're starting a small business called Jade's Toybox to sell carefully vetted, educational toys, mainly made in the U.S. and Europe.

#### COMMON SOURCES OF LEAD POISONING IN KIDS

Old paint: It chips off walls or is released in renovations of homes built before 1978

Drinking water: The metal leaches from lead pipes, solder and older brass faucets

Soil: Paint dust, leaded-gas exhaust and industrial sources add to naturally occurring lead

Parents' jobs and hobbies: Toxic dust can cling to those who routinely work with lead

Food: Lead-glazed ceramic dishes and lead-crystal decanters can cause contamination

Folk medicines: Some remedies popular in Hispanic and Asian communities are high in lead

Source: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention

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