

Making Your (Toy) List and Checking it Twice

There is a commercial currently running that depicts Indianapolis Colts QB Peyton Manning and a young actress cheerfully buying inappropriate gifts for friends and relatives — a mouth guard, a football (that Manning believes is cleverly disguised in the wrapping paper), shampoo for men who are bald and a box of taffy for an older gentleman with dentures. Funny stuff. But there is truth in the message. It is important that the gifts you are giving fit the needs and abilities of the recipient — and that is particularly critical when the gift is a toy or a game for a child.



Industry compliance with new federal guidelines, increased enforcement on imports and greater consumer awareness combine to make U.S. toys safer than ever. In 2009, there were 38 toy recalls, down from 162 in 2008, and 14 recalls involving lead, down from 85 in 2008.

Yet the safest toy can become a danger in the wrong hands. Education and common sense on the part of toy buyers is the key. Research the toy or game you plan to buy and know the child who is going to receive it. At this time of year, parents need to help relatives and friends ask the right questions, before purchase:

- What is the age recommendation?
- Read all labels, instructions and warnings. Ask the retailer if you can look at a sample toy or game and read the instructions before you buy.
- What does the toy look and feel like?
- What sounds does it make? How loud is it? Does it move? Light up? Become hot?
- If it is a doll or stuffed animal are the eyes, nose ears, etc. firmly attached?

Once a gift is in your house, make sure it doesn't turn into a hazard.

- Any toy or item given to infants or small children must have parts that are too big to get caught in the throat, nose or ears. **(A good rule of thumb is that any toy or piece that fits through a toilet paper roll is too small for an infant or young child.)**
- Avoid toys with small parts that can be pulled or broken off. If a toy becomes damaged or broken, repair it or toss it out.
- If you are giving toys to several children in one family, keep in mind that younger children will want to play with older kids' toys. Keep those items out of infants' hands.
- Make sure children know how to play safely with their toys. Model safe play behavior for young children and be quick to correct them or remove the toy if they are not able to play safely or carefully.

Don't forget about older friends and relatives. Make sure the gifts you are giving grandpa or great aunt Marge can be easily used and enjoyed. They should not be too heavy or awkward to handle. For people with arthritis, select items that can be easily opened and closed; avoid gifts that require assembly. Choose large type books for anyone with impaired vision.



And most of all, remember: Some of the best "gifts" at holiday time are *not* toys, clothes, jewelry or gadgets, but the quality time you spend together enjoying the sights and sounds of the season.

Sources: Consumer Product Safety Commission; Toyinfo.org.

Have A Leaner Greener Road Trip



Here is a New Year's Resolution the whole family can be part of and benefit from. You can save some green (maybe leaving a little more for presents), take some of the stress out of holiday trips and leave your corner of the earth a little greener. All it takes is a little planning and a few adjustments to your driving habits and travel plans.

Try this...	To achieve or avoid this ...
If you have more than one vehicle, take the one with the best gas mileage, or consider renting a hybrid or other car with better gas mileage.	Less gas used, money saved, fewer emissions.
Get good directions ahead of time and/or use GPS. You can also create and print a customized map showing the best gas prices on your route at the Drive Smarter Challenge website	Getting lost = wasting gas, losing time and turning your happy holiday crew into a bunch of cranky travelers.
Set the alarm, get an earlier start. Drive off-peak.	Avoid bumper to bumper drive to reduce gas use and stress for driver and passengers.
Knowledge is power (at the pump). Don't leave fill-ups on the road to chance. Find out the current cost of gas, and identify the lowest local gas prices along your route, before you start out. Log on to www.gasbuddy.com . There is a mobile application for that so you can also check enroute.	Eliminate unpleasant surprises. Know exactly what fuel is going to cost from here to Aunt Suzy's. Take it to the next step and figure out alternatives to driving around once you get there: public transportation, bikes, walking? You might even decide it makes sense to choose another form of transportation for this trip.
Maintain and you'll gain. Pre-trip preparation and good driving habits add up in your favor. Every little bit does count.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Inflate tires to proper PSI (3% mileage improvement) • Drive 60 or under—higher speeds eat up gas • Use the grade of oil your car maker specifies and it can mean up to 2% gas saving • Avoid idling when you can • Just say no to road rage. It 's not only safer, but speeding, rapid braking and acceleration take a toll
Lighten your load. Take a close look at what you are dragging along before you load up the car. Maybe you don't need three hair dryers or that many changes of clothes.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 100 extra pounds can decrease mileage about 2% • Place items in trunk instead of on the roof ; drag can cut your mileage up to 5%, but be careful not to overload the trunk, either.

Sources: ABC7newschicago.com; drivesmarterchallenge.org



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