

A Parents Guide to AI Enabled Toys - Understanding the Gifts Your Child Received Over the Holidays

December 30, 2023 - A recent report by US PIRG titled "Trouble in Toyland," highlights the privacy and safety issues create by AI-enabled toys. Many toys of this type were widely distributed during the holidays and its quite likely that most parents aren't really aware of the issues they create. It's time to get to know the toys your children are playing with and crucial to be aware of potential risks associated with these high-tech playthings.

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Primary Issues:

Data Collection and Security: Many smart toys are equipped with AI features that involve data collection, posing potential risks to children's privacy. The report highlights instances where companies have been found to mishandle sensitive information, raising concerns about the security of personal data. These toys often include sensors and both video and voice recording devices that collect highly personal information and then store it. Moreover, that data may wind up stored in the cloud and be subject to hacking.

The report underlines the need for enhanced regulation in the smart toy industry. Some companies have faced sanctions due to insufficient privacy measures, with incidents ranging from data breaches to unauthorized access to children's information. In at least one case, a child was kidnapped after playing with a smart toy. While she was recovered, the recovery occurred more than 100 miles from her home.

Another alarming issue raised in the report is the continued availability of recalled toys on online platforms. Despite existing regulations, these toys, including those posing safety risks, manage to find their way back into the market, potentially endangering children.

Companies Sanctioned:

The report sheds light on governmental actions against several companies, including Meta (Facebook,) Amazon, Walmart, Target, eBay, and Poshmark. In letters to these companies, lawmakers highlighted the failure of online marketplaces to prevent the sale of recalled products, emphasizing that they've fallen short on their responsibility to keep users safe.

Protecting Your Children:

To safeguard your child's privacy, consider taking the following steps.

Before purchasing any smart toy, conduct thorough research on the manufacturer's privacy practices. Look for clear information on data collection, storage, and sharing policies.

Regularly check for toy recalls on websites like cpsc.gov/recalls to ensure that the products you own or intend to purchase meet safety standards.

Follow age recommendations provided by the manufacturer. Be cautious of toys with small parts that could pose choking hazards or toys designed for older children that may be inappropriate for younger ones.

When buying toys online, choose reputable platforms and sellers. Be wary of anonymous sellers, especially on third-party marketplaces.

Keep yourself informed about developments in the smart toy industry and any updated regulations. Awareness is key to making informed decisions as a consumer.

Even though the holiday season is coming to an end, it's essential for parents to balance the excitement of tech-savvy toys with a commitment to protecting their children's privacy. If your child received any smart toys this season, don't be afraid to research them and, if necessary, remove them from your home. By staying vigilant and making informed choices, parents can ensure a safer playtime environment for their kids. Your children may not be happy with your choices now, but they will thank you as they get older.

by Jim Malmberg

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