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They Built Safe Toys But Couldn't Sell Them

By David Williamson

Is it possible to create toys that are completely safe for young children — toys that won't break, get swallowed, burn, make ear-damaging noises, cut small hands, shock or emit dangerous radiation?

Wouldn't such playthings make a fortune for their manufacturers?

Wouldn't consumer groups and parents everywhere be grateful?

The Questor Education Products Co., a Bronx, N.Y.-based toy firm found out the hard way that the answers to these questions, at least in its experience, are "yes," "no" and "no."

Most Rigorous Testing

In late 1973, the company challenged Dr. Jay M. Arena, a child safety expert at the medical center, and Dr. Samuel Southard, chief of pediatrics at Atlantic City (N.J.) Medical Center, to submit some of its products to the most rigorous safety testing ever done on toys.

The two physicians, who have recently published an account of their work in *Clinical Pediatrics*, consulted with dozens of chemists, engineers, physicists, poison experts and others over a two-year period. They also had the toys, which Questor called "Shrimpies," sent to two major commercial testing companies specifying the analyses they wanted performed.

The toys included cars, trucks, people, farm animals, boats, steam engines and building blocks, all made from a new class of thermoplastic polymers known as Kraton.

"We put these toys through every



BUILDING SAFELY—The blocks Dr. Jay M. Arena is using are the only part of the Supersafe line of toys Questor Education Products Co. still manufactures. Arena, professor of pediatrics and director of the Poison Control Center, and another physician coordinated rigorous safety testing on the toys over a two-year period. (Photo by Ina Fried)

test imaginable, including some that had never been done before, because Questor wanted to prove their products were absolutely safe," Arena said in an interview. "We

were interested in developing absolutely safe standards for testing."

Mechanical jaws chewed the colorful Shrimpies, he said. They were also dropped repeatedly on hard surfaces, exposed to flames, incubated with bacteria, examined for sharp edges and projects and assaulted in a variety of other ways.

"Since the playthings emitted no sounds or radiations and were not designed for use with electrical current, they were shown to be free from these hazards," the pediatrician said.

Still more tests proved that preschool children could not be hurt by chewing on Shrimpies and leaching out toxic chemicals, that the smallest parts were too big to be swallowed and that X-rays could find the plastic Kraton even if a child managed to consume some anyway.

With Flying Colors

Shrimpies that reached the marketplace in 1975 had passed all their trials with flying colors. Convinced that they had created perfect toys, Questor executives, who paid for the experiments, dubbed their entire Kraton product line "Supersafes."

"Earlier, we had conducted extensive surveys of mothers with young children, and just about all of them said they wanted toys that were first safe and then educational," said Len Cooke, Questor's manufacturing manager.

But for some reason, Supersafes didn't sell well, Cooke said.

Observers were stationed in toy stores to watch the buying habits of consumers and find out why.

Fun To Play With

"Most people bought toys that looked like they would be fun to play with regardless of their safety or educational value," he said wistfully.

"Because they weren't selling, we had to stop making Shrimpies last year and the only part of the Supersafe line we still manufacture are the building blocks."

Pediatrician Southard was philosophical about the failure of the toys.

"Unfortunately, safety doesn't turn people on in this country," he said. "I really can't explain it."

Is Safety Dull?

"Perhaps it has something to do with our heritage — rugged individualism, winning the West and all that. Maybe toy buyers equate safety with dullness," he added. "Or maybe Questor didn't push them hard enough."

Arena has been an outspoken child safety advocate since 1931 when, as a medical student at Duke, he treated a youngster who swallowed lye.

He said that between July 1, 1975 and June 30, 1976, an estimated 783,000 children were injured badly enough by toys to require treatment in hospital emergency rooms in this country, according to the U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission.

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TV To Focus On Disaster Survival

What would you do if you were caught in a fire, flood, tornado, hurricane or earthquake? You can find out your "survival quotient" by watching "The National Disaster Survival Test," Sunday (May 1) from 8-9:30 p.m. on WRDU (Channel 28).

Emmy Award-winner Tom Snyder will host the program, an NBC Television Big Event, produced by Warren V. Bush Productions, Inc., in cooperation with the National Safety Council.

"Every day, somewhere in the nation, people helplessly confront disaster events, within which there are thousands of accident events," said Vincent L. Tofany, National Safety Council president.

"While most major disasters 'just happen,' most of the accidents within disasters are preventable provided people know how to cope with them," Tofany said. "The National Disaster Survival Test should help people do just that."



BACK FOR A HAPPY OCCASION—These graduates of the Intensive Care Nursery were among 60 children who returned to the hospital for the unit's third annual reunion last week. The party in the Board Room gave an opportunity for the

children, their families and the ICN staff to renew acquaintances and for the staff to see how well the children have done since leaving the hospital. See page 3 for more guests of honor. (Photos by Ina Fried)