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'Hot 20' toys for Santa's list

HEATHER BURKE; Bloomberg News
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Hasbro Inc.'s electronic guitar and toys that promote exercise may be among the best-selling gifts this holiday season, the biggest test of toy demand after the recall of more than 20 million Chinese-made products.

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The Power Tour Electric Guitar by Hasbro and the Smart Cycle by Mattel Inc.'s Fisher-Price are among the "Hot 20" chosen by Toy Insider, a supplement that will appear in the November issue of Hearst Corp.'s Redbook magazine.

China, the world's biggest exporter of consumer products, has faced pressure from global regulators to strengthen safety checks after products from contaminated toothpaste to tainted pet food and toy trains containing lead paint were recalled. About 80 percent of U.S. toys are produced in China.

"With all the concern about recalls and safety, parents will be out there looking for information on toys, especially for younger children," Jonathan Samet, co-founder of the Toy Insider, said Monday. "A trend will definitely be more toward exercise toys that get kids off the couch."

Mattel, the world's largest toymaker, last week apologized to China and took blame for design problems in its products. The company, which makes 65 percent of its toys in China, sent an executive to meet with the country's product-safety chief and apologize in front of reporters and television cameras.

The fourth quarter, which includes holiday shopping between Thanksgiving and Christmas, accounts for more than a third of annual revenue for Mattel and Hasbro, the two biggest toymakers in the world.

U.S. toy sales this year through July climbed 3.3 percent to \$9.3 billion from \$9 billion from the same period a year earlier, according to the NPD Group Inc., a Port Washington, N.Y.-based research firm. Of 11 categories, vehicle sales had the biggest year-over-year gain, at 15 percent. Sales of infant and preschool items climbed 11 percent and youth electronics 9 percent.

The recalls made the panel "very careful" during the selection process, said Samet, the publisher of Adventure Publishing Group's Toy Book, a trade magazine covering the industry since 1983. The selection panel checked U.S. Consumer Product Safety Commission reports to make sure none of the chosen items had any safety issues, he said.

This year's list include Lego A/S's motorized Monster Dino and Playmobil UK Ltd.'s Rescue Hospital Playset, with a adjustable operating table and moveable patients' beds. Lego, based in Billund, Denmark, and Playmobil, based in Basildon, U.K., make most of their toys in Europe, said Samet.

The panel, which included Samet and other Toy Book staff, doesn't forecast holiday sales or say if the products were made in China or not.

Exercise-themed toys include the Smart Cycle, in which children four and older play learning games while riding a stationary bike. The percentage of children ages 2-5 who are overweight increased to 14 percent in a 2003-2004 survey from 5 percent in 1976-1980, according to U.S. government data.

"Anyone who contributes to kids getting fatter these days, whether it be fast food or video games or toys, are seeing some implicit pressure to provide healthy products," said Gerrick Johnson, a toy analyst at BMO Capital Markets in New York. "Anything that toy companies can do to

promote kids' activity is a positive."

Johnson predicts holiday toy sales will be unchanged.

For children 2 and younger, RC2 Corp.'s Lamaze unit makes the Spin & Explore Garden Gym for babies to play on their stomachs and VTech Holdings Ltd.'s Sit-to-Stand Dancing Tower, which lets children play either while crawling or standing up.

Music-themed toys are popular this year because of television shows and movies including "American Idol" and Walt Disney Co.'s "High School Musical," Samet said. The music-themed toys on the list include the Power Tour guitar, Shelcore UK Ltd.'s Sound Beginnings Groove 'N Go Music Maker, which allows children 18 months and older to change rhythm and melody by stacking rings, and KIDdesigns Inc.'s American Idol Talent Challenge DVD karaoke game.

The second annual Toy Insider will be published Oct. 15 in Redbook. The group of toy experts selected 102 items, broken down by age, to be included in the supplement, which is advertiser-supported.

Recommendations are from Toy Insider's "Hot 20" Toys for the 2007 Holiday Season. For the complete list, see Page D2. Toy Insider's 'Hot 20' Toys for the 2007 Holiday Season

It may be September but the toy industry already is gearing up for the holiday shopping season. And that means a series of lists predicting what will be hot on retailers shelves in the coming weeks. Here's a look at the toys that your kids may want this year – or the list of items that could be hard to find come December.

0-2 Years

- Brightlings Exploration Station (Leapfrog)
- Sit-to-Stand Dancing Tower (VTech)
- Sound Beginnings Groove 'N Go Music Maker (Shelcore)
- Spin & Explore Garden Gym (RC2's Lamaze)

3-5 Years

- Disney Princess Enchanted Tales Interactive Throne (Jakks Pacific's CDI)
- Playmobil Rescue Hospital Playset (Playmobil)
- Littlest Pet Shop Display & Play Round & Round Pet Town (Hasbro)
- Smart Cycle (Mattel's Fisher-Price)
- Transformers Optimus Prime Voice Changer Helmet (Hasbro)
- Whiz Kid Learning System (VTech)

6-8 Years

- American Idol Talent Challenge (KIDdesigns Inc.'s Tech 2 Go)
- Eyeclops Bionic Eye (Jakks Pacific)
- Hannah Montana in Concert Stage (Jakks Pacific's Play Along)
- ICoaster (Mega Brands)
- Karito Kids (Kids Give)
- Rubik's Revolution (Techno Source)

9+ Years

- Air Hogs Havoc Heli Laser Battle (Spin Master)
- Fashion Magazine Editor (Fashion Angels Enterprises)
- Monster Dino (Lego)
- Power Tour Electric Guitar (Hasbro's Tiger Electronics)

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