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Action on danger toys

By JAMIE ALLEN

A MAJOR initiative to improve toy safety and protect the Hongkong consumer through legislation was announced yesterday.

Secretary for Trade and Industry Hamish Macleod said the Government had opted for legislative controls rather than self-regulation by the industry on the basis of recommendations made by an inter-departmental working group, set up in April.

The group said this was the most effective way to ensure that toys were safe and to protect Hongkong children.

The regulations, which will apply only to toys sold in Hongkong, mean that toy manufacturers and importers - but not retailers - are now liable to prosecution.

Although this initiative is not a reaction to a "crisis situation", Mr Macleod

Negligent firms may be sued

pointed out that many people in Government feel uneasy that legislation does not exist to deal with the problem.

"In the past we had to use persuasion to stop people selling unsafe toys. But we had no power to intervene if they refused. We now want to be able to intervene before the damage is done," he said.

But the Government will not begin drafting legislation until after a two to three-month consultation period.

"We wish first to seek the views of the public, that is to say the consumers, and the trade, the manufacturers and retailers, on this proposition. And specifically, on the question of what sort of standards should be adopted," Mr Macleod said.

An expanded working group, including representa-

tives of local toy manufacturers and the Consumer Council, will be set up to examine standards.

Such standards include those of the International Standards Organisation, the International Committee of Toy Industries and the Committee de Normalisation - a body which sets standards followed by the European Economic Community and the European Free Trade Association - which are 90 per cent similar in content.

These standards restrict the use of sharp and pointed edges, flammable material, toxic stuffing, glass, poisonous lead paint and objects of a size which can be swallowed in toys.

The regulations, which are unlikely to reach the Legislative Council until the second half of next year, will be

enforced by the Customs and Excise Department with help from the Government Laboratory. It is envisaged that penalties will be about \$20,000 and six months in prison.

While not wishing to preempt the decisions of the working group, Mr Macleod said that enforcement would most probably rely on public complaints rather than an active program of product testing.

He emphasised that the Government did not want the legislation to create an army of costly bureaucrats.

"We want a simple, economic but effective scheme," Mr Macleod said.

The Consumer Council yesterday welcomed the Government's new initiative but suggested it take a more active stance to eliminate the

problem of unsafe toys in Hongkong.

The chief executive of the council, Mrs Pamela Chan Wong-shui, said that any legislation enacted would be less effective if the Government only relied on complaints. An active policy of selective sampling of both locally produced and imported toys should be undertaken, she suggested.

The reaction of local toy manufacturers yesterday was one of general unconcern.

The managing director of Meco Developments Limited, Mr Bill Blaauw, said since Hongkong toy companies sell less than three per cent of their products on the local market the rules would not really affect them.

The company secretary of Wah Shing Toys, Mr Joseph Lo Chi-man, also said the regulations would have little bearing on his company as it concentrated on manufacturing for American firms.