

# A dangerous game with suspect toys

IN the run-up to Christmas, SUE GREEN and CARRIE LEE look at the dangers of sub-standard toys to children and what, if anything, Hongkong is doing about controlling them.

**H**ONGKONG'S children risk serious injury, even death, from toys that may find their way into Christmas stockings because the territory has no legal controls on toy safety.

Drafting of such controls has been underway for more than a year, but won't be ready for Christmas. That puts youngsters at risk from toys the Hongkong Toy Council's chairman, Dennis Ting Hok-shu, admits may not meet tough international standards.

A *South China Morning Post* investigation has found on sale here a wide range of toys the Hongkong Consumer Council says are dangerous, including some it has called on manufacturers to withdraw.

Hongkong's toy industry, already under siege from the United States "Toycott" — the boycott of toys made in China — is shrugging off Consumer Council warnings to parents as an annual event.

But although Mr Ting says most of Toy Council's 180 members have contracts preventing export reject sales going on the local market, he admits some might sell them to their staff or channel them to hawkers.

"Rejects are sold by some companies through the back door and eventually get on to the street but mostly they are functional or safe toys but don't meet the specifications of the [overseas] buyers in Hongkong," he says.

A toy safety workshop here in October heard that government testing of toys had found defects were increasing. And the Consumer Council says

many apparently innocent toys harbour hidden dangers, including cancer-causing chemicals, attachments that can strangle or choke tiny tots, noises that can cause deafness and sharp edges or long pins that can kill.

But even when the dangers are known, the council is powerless to act: it has no legal right to ban toys and manufacturers are not obliged to obey a council request to withdraw a dangerous toy from sale.

The council's information officer, Simon Ho Siu-kau, says many such toys do not even carry a brand label.

"When the manufacturers cannot be traced, we can do little about it," he says. "You cannot withdraw them from the market because you don't know where they are sold. And in many cases consumers don't know they are dangerous."

**D**ETAILS of Hongkong's new toy safety laws, to go before the Legislative Council next year, are still secret.

But they'll be based on a government working group's September 1990 recommendations and the Consumer Council says they don't go far enough. Noisy toys such as guns, model cars, robots, even squeaky bears, can deafen a toddler if held close to the ear. Yet they're not covered by the recommendations.

But they will set limits on the levels of toxic heavy metals such as lead and chromium in paints used on toys — one of the areas Mr Ting says could be a problem with wooden toys imported here from China.

"If you impose some sort of

restrictions many toys imported from China which are sold in the street in Hongkong may not meet the standard, but those toys have prevailed in China for centuries.

"There is no chemical test on the paint used in China. That is cottage industry," he says.

Among the toys the Consumer Council has tried to force off the market here is a balloon blowing kit, banned in Australia and Malaysia because it contains a toxic substance that can cause cancer.

The *South China Morning Post* found such kits in local grocery stores.

Among other toys identified by the council as potentially lethal, but which we found freely available in Hongkong stores, were: toy knives and metal aeroplanes with sharp edges; pull-along toys with long strings that could strangle a child; fragile toys that break easily leaving sharp edges and dangerous debris; toy foods so realistic children try to eat them and toys with small parts or beads that could choke a child or block the nostrils.

Archery sets, darts and air guns powerful enough to cause injury and intended for adults were also found. But a toy store chain supervisor Mr Mok (who refused to reveal his full name) says half the buyers are children aged about 12 or 13.

Mr Ting reacted angrily to suggestions that international toy safety standards should be applied in Hongkong.

He said local manufacturers were already meeting those standards for their export orders — otherwise they would

lose customers. But locally, buyers set their own standards.

"When you go to a barber do you ask to see the licence when they wash your hair? It's irrelevant but it's the same thing, you set the standard you want."

So why should Hongkong people settle for less than international safety standards? Mr Ting said they would not necessarily be lower.

**A**SKED why international standards were inappropriate he hung up, saying he would reply only in writing to written questions.

In October this year an international toy safety seminar here was told by Industry Department assistant director-general, Ernest Evans, government tests had shown a rising defect rate in toys exported from Hongkong - but locally made toys had improved.

"This means that those goods manufactured outside of

Hongkong and brought here for re-exporting contain the bulk of the defects," he said.

Between January and September this year Hongkong re-exported about \$13 billion worth of Chinese-made toys to the US. It's those toys that have also drawn the wrath of US consumer groups this Christmas, with a call for a boycott because of allegations child labour is used in their manufacture.

The local toy industry says it's too soon to see the impact of the "Toycott" - that won't be known until Christmas sales figures are in and the next round of ordering begins in February at the giant toy fairs in New York and Nuremberg.

But Mr Ting and a leading local toy maker, Bill Blaauw, say the "Toycott" is so far having no effect on US Christmas sales.

They also shrug off the allegations of danger in our

toyshops: "Every year at Christmas time we get irritated by sometimes Germany, sometimes England, sometimes America, mostly America, by people who claim that toys are dangerous," Mr Blaauw says.

Mr Ting says safety allegations about loose eye buttons, paint, "some girl swallowing the hair of a doll" commonly arise at Christmas.

The Government's defect allegations are superficial, unwanted comment from a third party on an issue the industry is already dealing with at its own international meetings, he says.

He accuses some consumer groups of ignorance and going overboard. For instance, moves to ban all cadmium from toy paint in Sweden because in a fire it releases a cancer-causing gas means Sweden would have no red or yellow toys. But the chances of a red or yellow toy catching fire are remote, Mr Ting says.