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## Protests Spur Stores to Seek Substitute for Vinyl in Toys

By JOSEPH PEREIRA  
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After recalling millions of toys to protect consumers from lead paint, toy makers face growing pressure over another material, a plastic found in myriad playthings, from balls to dolls.

The Toy Industry Association, the manufacturers' trade group, says polyvinyl chloride, or PVC, in toys poses no safety risks. Still, retail giants **Wal-Mart Stores Inc.**, **Target Corp.** and **Sears Holdings Corp.** have started programs to get rid of some of the toys and other products that contain PVC, bowing to pressure from environmental activists concerned that children who chew on PVC could ingest dangerous chemicals. Some of these chemicals have been banned in the European Union and will also be illegal in California under a law effective next year.



Associated Press

Protesters urged Target in May to phase out PVC products and packaging.


Some of the first plastic playthings without PVC -- commonly known as vinyl -- will be shown at the world's largest toy trade show, the American International Toy Fair, which opens on Sunday in New York. Green Toys Inc., a San Francisco start-up, will unveil several lines of toys made from organic and recycled plastics. Consumers "want to know what is going into the toys their children are playing with," says venture capitalist Robert von Goeben, who co-founded the company. He says Green Toys has been getting inquiries from many major retailers.

Other manufacturers are rushing to introduce vinyl-free plastic toys as early as this spring but aren't saying much about them because of the proprietary nature of the new materials.

**Mattel Inc.** and **Hasbro Inc.** are testing a corn-based plastic from NatureWorks LLC, Minnetonka, Minn., in developing a variety of toys, according to people familiar with the matter. "We feel that toys are a natural fit for our product," says Snehal Desai, chief marketing officer for NatureWorks, which is jointly owned by Cargill Inc. of Minneapolis and Teijin Ltd. of Japan.

One company using NatureWorks' patented Ingeo plastic polymer is I Play, an Asheville, N.C., children's products maker. In May, it plans to ship to retailers a new line of PVC-free play teacups and dining ware. Because of questions raised about PVC, some consumers "are asking for

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materials made of something else," says Becky Cannon, I Play chief executive. In addition to toys, I Play's nonvinyl offerings include children's clothing, rain boots and sunglasses. Toys "R" Us Inc. and Target are among I Play's customers, Ms. Cannon says.

Depending on how it is made, PVC frequently contains lead or other toxic metals. Vinyl chloride, used to make PVC, has been identified by the Environmental Protection Agency as a carcinogen. Certain chemicals in the phthalate family, which often are used to soften PVC in toys and other products, have been linked by researchers to developmental and other health problems in children.

Exactly how dangerous PVC is to people is disputed. In 2003, the Consumer Product Safety Commission denied a petition by environmental groups to ban PVC in toys. The commission said it didn't believe children chew on PVC toys long enough to cause harm.

Among retailers seeking PVC-free products, Target in November pledged to remove vinyl from a range of store-branded products, including toys, bibs, lunch boxes and coolers, that are being rolled out this year. Target says it is discussing "partnerships" with major companies to eliminate PVC in their products but declined to elaborate.

Sears, which owns Kmart, in December announced a similar PVC-free plan. Wal-Mart has begun phasing out vinyl from its packaging and some products and last May announced a nationwide recall of bibs made of PVC. A Wal-Mart spokeswoman says the company is seeking vinyl alternatives for all of its children's products.

PVC is widely used outside the toy business, in vinyl siding and water pipes. Some pipe makers switched from PVC to substances like calcium for water pipes going into homes. But PVC containing lead is still in certain toys.

In January, under pressure from Illinois authorities, Ty Inc., the maker of Beanie Babies, replaced its Jammin' Jenna dolls with a redesigned version using denim shoes instead of PVC ones. Testing had found the vinyl contained quantities of lead that exceeded the state's limit for children's products under a new law. Last month, tests by the Center for Environmental Health found high levels of lead in several products, including certain vinyl coolers used for storing breast-milk bottles. Michigan also has a new law restricting lead levels in children's products.



Green Toys' PVC-free lines include a child's tea set.

The retailers' anti-PVC moves and the new laws in the U.S. and abroad have put the toy and children's products industries under pressure to find substitutes for vinyl and the phthalates being banned by California and the EU, a daunting task given how widespread their use is. In December, testing of 1,200 randomly selected toys by the Ecology Center, a Michigan

environmental group, found 47% of them contained PVC.

The substance is found in "just about anything that you can think of that ... has a little bit of flexibility to it," says Joan Lawrence, vice president of standards and regulatory affairs at the Toy

Industry Association.

The PVC toys that Ecology Center identified included the Fashion Fever Barbie doll from Mattel and a Classic Tinkertoy construction set from Hasbro. Mattel says it doesn't believe that PVC poses a danger and Mattel is "in the exploratory phase with a variety of different companies for alternative plastics." Hasbro says, "We've always had a policy to look at alternative materials we use in all of our toys and games, and that certainly includes PVC recently." Both Mattel and Hasbro say they are now using a nonphthalate as a plastic softener.

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services has warned that phthalates like those used to soften plastic have been known to cause cancer in rats, and hormonal and developmental disruptions in children's reproductive organs. A study of 96 baby boys in Denmark and Finland published in 2005 found that those fed breast milk from mothers who had ingested higher levels of phthalates had less testosterone at three months of age than boys exposed to lower levels. It wasn't known how the mothers had ingested phthalates.

Another study, published in December, of 102 Bulgarian children aged 2 to 7, said that those exposed to a certain phthalate in dust were more likely to experience wheezing problems. Researchers are still trying to determine how these chemicals can enter a child's system.

Antonia Calafat, chief research chemist at the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, says, "What we know is that phthalates at very high exposure levels result in adverse health effects in animals."

The Vinyl Institute, a trade group, is launching a campaign to inform retailers that PVC is safe. "Some companies are being pressured and misled into having doubts about PVC," says Tim Burns, the group's president.

--Nicholas Casey contributed to this article.

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