

Opportunities to Strengthen Oversight of Toxic Substances in Children’s Products

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A report to congressional requesters

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What GAO Found

The Consumer Product Safety Commission (CPSC) uses risk-based approaches to target children’s products that may contain toxic substances for examination at U.S. ports. For example, it uses U.S. Customs and Border Protection systems that analyze national shipment and law enforcement data to target high-risk products. Examinations include screening products with handheld devices for lead and other toxic substances and reviewing importer documentation to verify that products were tested by third-party labs and meet CPSC safety standards.

CPSC’s Process for Examining Children’s Products at U.S. Ports



Sources: GAO analysis of Consumer Product Safety Commission (CPSC) documents; GAO (icons). | GAO-26-107736

Starting July 2026, CPSC will require importers to electronically submit (“e-file”) key data (including product identification and place of testing) when products enter U.S. ports. According to CPSC officials, e-filing may help address challenges, such as delays in completing examinations when importers lack lab testing documentation. However, CPSC has not developed an oversight plan to ensure that importers file timely, accurate data. Establishing such a plan would help CPSC ensure that e-filing achieves its intended objectives, such as making targeting more effective and examinations more efficient.

CPSC has review processes to verify that third-party labs that test children’s products meet its accreditation and other requirements. For example, labs owned or controlled by a manufacturer or government entity must provide information about their safeguards from undue influence. However, CPSC has not proactively analyzed data across all types of labs to assess potential risks, such as inaccurate testing or misreported results. CPSC recently began analyzing violations data for labs owned by manufacturers to better evaluate their safeguards from undue influence, but it does not do so for independent or government labs. By better leveraging its violations data for these labs, CPSC would be better positioned to identify and address potential problems associated with all types of labs, which could help prevent violative products from entering the market.

CPSC has reviewed and updated some testing requirements for children’s products, but not its requirements for lead or phthalates (toxic substances used to make plastics more pliable). The Consumer Product Safety Improvement Act of 2008 requires CPSC to review its lead requirements at least every 5 years; however, it has not done so. In addition, CPSC does not have written procedures for how staff should monitor changes related to phthalates and other toxic substances in children’s products. By reviewing its lead requirements and documenting a process for staying up-to-date on toxic substances, CPSC could help ensure that it does not miss opportunities to strengthen its standards and protect children from harm.

Why GAO Did This Study

CPSC is responsible for regulating the safety of thousands of consumer products, including children’s products. It requires manufacturers and importers to have certain toys and other children’s products tested by labs for lead and other toxic substances before they can enter the U.S. market. However, the large volume of products entering U.S. ports makes it challenging to ensure compliance.

GAO was asked to review how CPSC addresses children’s products that contain toxic substances. This report examines CPSC’s (1) processes for examining children’s products and planning for an electronic data filing system; (2) processes for approving and assessing risks of third-party labs that test children’s products; and (3) efforts to keep safety standards for lead and other toxic substances up-to-date.

GAO reviewed CPSC’s third-party testing and lab accreditation requirements; analyzed CPSC policies and procedures; and visited a nongeneralizable sample of four ports to observe product examinations. Ports were selected to prioritize those with higher volumes of children’s products entering the U.S. and to provide a mix of geographic locations.

What GAO Recommends

GAO recommends CPSC (1) establish a plan to oversee compliance with e-filing requirements, (2) establish a process for using violations data to assess risks associated with independent and government labs, (3) review its lead requirements and document a process for completing lead reviews every 5 years, and (4) document a process for staying up-to-date on changes related to phthalates and other toxic substances. CPSC agreed with the recommendations and indicated it would implement them.