

The Ultimate Smart Toy Safety Guide

Your resource for keeping kids safe in a tech-connected world.

From Wi-Fi connected talking dinosaurs to build-your-own superhero gear, “smart” toys have hit the market hard. In 2017, the global smart toys market reached \$7.78 billion, and it’s expected to grow at a 15.5% compound annual growth rate by 2025. That’s a lot of intelligence.

But just what kind of data are these toys keeping track of? And is it safe?

While there are plenty of physical safety hazards to consider with children’s toys—such as your kid choking on a small part—this guide focuses on how to keep your child’s information safe in an increasingly connected world.



So what exactly are tech toys, anyway?

Seems everything’s smart these days—and the toy market is no different. Smart toys, or tech toys, are children’s play devices equipped with internet connectivity, interactive technology, or artificial intelligence. These connected toys can adapt and grow with your child and offer a playful, often educational, alternative to the sandbox.

Whereas smart toys for adults might look like a virtual reality gaming system or a learning thermostat (for the true grown-ups), smart toys for kids might be a Siri-enabled teddy bear or a code-savvy monster truck. You can even buy your teen (or first-grader!) a robot that'll help teach them programming basics. In this market, there's a little something for almost every kid from 3 to 13—or, well, 27.



What data can companies glean from my kid's smart toy?

Big tech companies—including Facebook, YouTube, and Google—collect data at near-alarming rates. And unless you take proper precautions, they can track your kid's data, too. Since many smart toys feature internet connectivity, it's important to understand what kind of information you might be unknowingly sending over the airwaves.

Depending on the smart toy you choose for your child, here are a few data points companies can glean from a child's smart toy:

- **Your kid's gender:** Sharing your kid's gender might seem harmless, but companies can use this data to tailor advertisements to your kiddo. And in the wrong hands, it could even help lead someone to your child.
- **Your family's address:** Many tech toys will ask for a mailing address. To help keep your kid's address private, open a P.O. Box or ask a friend or relative if you can use their address instead.
- **Chat logs:** Tech toys that can “hear” and “respond” to your kid receive those words as data. Read those privacy settings closely to disable this feature when possible.
- **Location tracking:** Google tracks location and other settings as a default, so if using an internet-connected device, be sure your internet settings are as safe as your smart toy settings.



How can I protect my child's privacy?

With all this Bluetooth connectivity, Wi-Fi compatibility, Siri enabling, and AI learning, parents are bound to have some privacy concerns—and they'd be right to. In 2015, tech toy giant VTech was served a lawsuit by the FTC for a large-scale data breach. This leak resulted in a gargantuan exposure of personal info from more than 5 million parents and children, including chat logs, birthdates, gender data, and other private info—and a \$650,000 FTC settlement in 2018. Yikes.

Thankfully, there are some measures you can take to keep your child (and family) as safe as possible when you foray into the tech toy scene. Here are our top tips.



Smart Toy Safety Checklist

1. Do your research.

First things first: before purchasing a new smart toy, take some time to learn about the smart toy market. Not all smart toys are created equal, and some require more personal information than others.

Ryan Afflitto, co-founder of Creation Crate, recommends testing the true smarts of a smart toy through STEM.org's credentialing framework, which rates and reviews toys based on their educational value for STEM (Science, Tech, Engineering, and Math).

2. Consider age appropriateness.

Kids are getting exposed to Wi-Fi enabled tech earlier and earlier. In fact, 64% of kids have access to the internet via their own laptop or tablet (up 22% from 2012), according to a Kids & Tech report by Influence Central.

“Even if content filtering is in place, there can always be things that slip through and make their way in front of your children’s eyes. Instead, you can consider some of the tablet devices for younger children that have no internet access and only have a select few learning apps and games pre-installed on them,” says Mike Towler, owner of Mike’s PC Repair Service.

3. Protect your kid’s personal information.

Does that new smart toy want you to enter your kid’s date of birth? How about their location, gender, or email address? Think before you enter, and limit the personal information you give. To help protect your child’s identity and increase their safety, avoid using the physical address where your kid lives. For the utmost security, open a P.O. Box or ask a family member or friend if they’d be ok with you using their address instead.

4. Update ALL your settings.

Set those smart toy settings right out of the box—but don’t rely on the default options. Make sure you update your privacy settings across all your internet platforms to protect your kids online. To start, turn off location tracking in Google Maps and browser searches, disable any chat logs, and make sure your internet connection is secured.

“For older children (8-12) you can start allowing them to use various toys and devices that access the internet as long as there is strict content monitoring in place. You must do your due diligence to ensure everything is configured so they can only access content from sources that you choose,” Towler says.

5. Watch for recalls.

As industry-leading tech toys continue to enter the market, there are bound to be a few hiccups along the way. Companies often issue recalls on products that run into safety concerns, so do a quick Google search on any item you’re considering to check for recalls.

6. Understand your rights.

If you suspect your data is not being protected or being misused, you don't have to handle it alone. Familiarize yourself with COPPA, or the Children's Online Privacy Protection Act, which is a federal regulation designed to help keep kids safe on the internet.

7. Report offenders.

A safer world for your kids is a safer world for their friends, too. If you believe a tech toy is not complying with COPPA, report it to the Federal Trade Commission, at [ftc.gov/complaint](https://www.ftc.gov/complaint).



Safest States for Kids' Online Safety

Now that you've studied up on how you can help improve your kids' online safety, here are the states doing the most to protect children online. The home security site Safewise.com gave 9 US states an "A" letter grade based on each state's internet crime rates, Malware infection rates, and laws addressing cyberbullying and sexting.

States with an "A" letter grade:

- Arkansas
- Connecticut
- Florida
- Georgia
- Kansas
- Pennsylvania
- South Dakota
- Texas
- Utah



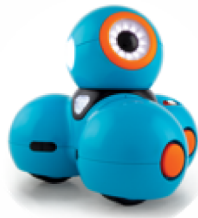
A few of today's top tech toys

With safety in mind, we looked at today's top tech toys and chose a few that feature transparency about the data they collect and robust privacy policies. If you're looking for a smart toy for your child, take a closer look at some of these to see if they might be a good fit.



1. **Code-a-Pillar™ by Fisher-Price**, Ages 3+

Why wait for college to teach your kiddos how to code? This colorful caterpillar features interlocking segments that light up based on the “programming” your kid creates. Once your kid arranges the segments as they please, the little insect travels across the floor accordingly. Since this toy moves based on the child's actions, your child develops critical thinking skills and coding basics—all while having a blast.



2. **Dash by Wonder Workshop**, Ages 3-5+

Keep that coding skill alive with an interactive robot that grows up alongside your child. Dash learns from your kids just as much as they learn from it. Equipped with Bluetooth connectivity and a companion iOS app, Dash adapts to its environment while your kids use basic coding through the app to teach it to wheel around in unique ways, sing songs, and even play the xylophone.



3. **Marvel Avengers Hero Inventor Kit by Little Bits**, Ages 8+

Let your little do their part for the multiverse with this Iron Man-esque gauntlet. Equipped with sleek hardware, tech sensors, and 18 built-in educational games, this hero kit unleashes your kid's creativity while inspiring their inner engineer. The gauntlet seamlessly syncs with a free app, which guides your child through coding basics to help them build and refine their superhero powers.



4. **Star Wars Battle Drones by Propel**, Ages 12+

Help your kid feel the force with these movie-worthy flying starships. Take your pick between the T-65 X-Wing Starfighter (think light side), the TIE Advanced X1 (think dark side), or the 74-Z Speeder Bike (think Clone Wars) to help your kid channel their inner Rey or Luke. Powered by reverse propulsion and Intelligence Awareness Technology (IAT), these drones use low-latency wireless communication and a compatible app to allow 12-person battles at speeds up to 35 Mph.



5. **Creation Crate Subscription**, Ages 12+

Want a tech toy that could educate and entertain your kid straight through college? This unique tech toy is perfect for your oldest kids. **Creation Crate** offers multiple monthly subscription options with hardware and software to match a range of skill levels. Every month, your kid will receive increasingly challenging software curriculum as they learn and grow.

Set your kids up for a safe future

The next generation is growing up in a tech-saturated culture, and it doesn't seem to be slowing down anytime soon. As STEM degrees continue to rise and coding schools become increasingly popular, STEM-heavy educational toys can help set up your kids for the language of the future, but they can also come with safety risks. So the next time your kid's birthday rolls around, keep our safety checklist in mind to help your child play and learn while staying safe. To top it all off, keep your kid's new smart toy functioning at its best with a quality internet connection.

Meet the Experts



Ryan Afflitto, co-founder of **Creation Crate**



Mike Towler, owner of **Mike's PC Repair Service**

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