

# Protecting Young Children

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Accidents or "preventable injuries" that take place in and around the home are the leading killers of children. Not only are accidents the single largest cause of death in children less than fifteen years of age, but accidents are also the leading cause of permanent or temporary disability in those over the age of one year. In the United States, 12 to 14 million children (one in four children under the age of 15) require medical attention due to accidental injury.

Most, if not all, childhood injury deaths and disabilities are preventable. Most home accidents occur because of childhood curiosity and unsafe physical environments. Simple child proofing when the child is an infant is not be enough to keep him or her safe throughout the childhood years. Caregivers should provide child-centered environment in which children can grow and play. This type of environment is one that is safe and hazard free.

At each developmental stage in a child's life, there are different possible environmental hazards. It is important to recognize these and to eliminate them from the child's environment. This isn't as difficult to do when all children under a caregiver's supervision are the same age. However, when there are many children of different ages present it is important to realize that products and/or situations that are not hazardous to an older child may be hazardous to a younger child.

## **What Is a Potentially Dangerous Situation?**

Injury accidents are made up of three important components. First, there must be a dangerous object (a cleaning bucket). Second, there must be someone who is vulnerable (a crawling child). Third, there must be circumstances in the environment conducive to an accident (the bucket is within reach of the crawling child).

*Dangerous Objects.* To help determine what sort of dangerous things may be lurking in the house, caregivers should try to view a room from the child's vantage point. If the child is an infant, the caregiver should lie on the floor and look all around the room. What looks interesting under furniture? What is at the child's eye level? What can the child reach if he or she pulls up? This may help the caregivers to better understand the dangers that may look attractive to their children.

*Someone Who is Vulnerable.* The second component -- someone who is vulnerable -- will change over time. As a child grows from an infant, to a toddler, to a young child, and beyond, caregivers will constantly have to reevaluate the home environment for safety. Having children of various ages will require a greater level of safety precautions. Children need protection not only from safety hazards they may encounter, but also from hazards caused by an older or younger child. To help keep up with the possible dangers, the American Academy of Pediatrics suggests that caregivers review the child's developmental capabilities in relationship to his or her playing environment by regularly asking themselves: "How far can he move? How high can he reach? What objects attract his attention? What can he do today that he couldn't do yesterday? What will he do tomorrow that he can't do today?".

*Environmental Circumstances.* Caregivers can control and monitor environmental circumstances. By eliminating the hazardous conditions that exist in the areas where children live and play, accidents can be greatly reduced if not completely eliminated.

To help determine the kind of hazards that might be in the home environment, it is helpful to review a child's developmental stages in terms of household hazards.

### **Children Zero to Six months**

The environment of very young infants is easier to make safe and to control than that for older children because infants have limited mobility and ability. However, infants do gain new skills quickly, and caregivers must always be alert to the potential dangers these new skills pose. During this time children may learn to roll over and may sit up. It's important that the child's crib is safe for sleeping. The mattress should fit snugly in the crib, so the child cannot get his or her face trapped between the mattress and the crib. Soft bedding materials such as pillows and comforters should not be used in the crib.

The distance between the slats is no more than 2-3/8 inches. There

should also be no cutouts on the end panels that can trap heads, arms, and legs. Also, if the crib is older, it should be tested for lead paint. Periodically, side rail slats should be checked to make sure that they are secure. Loose glue joints should be repaired so they do not fall out and leave space for the child to slip out and get caught.

Infant changing tables should have guardrails on the side and a safety strap for securing the infant in place. Even with safety straps, however, it is extremely important never to leave a child unattended on a changing table. Ideally, the middle of the changing table should be slightly lower than the sides.

### **Children Six to Twelve Months**

During this time of development, children become mobile. In these months children begin creeping, crawling and even walking. Sitting and standing alone are also new abilities. Children of this age typically spend a great deal of time reaching and grabbing for things. They also learn about the world by using their senses of sight, touch, and taste. Almost everything a child touches at this age will go directly into his or her mouth.

As with younger infants, crib safety is still extremely important at this age. By the time the child can crawl on hands and knees, all crib gyms and mobiles should be removed from the crib. By the time the child can sit up, his or her mattress should be lowered to a level where he or she cannot fall out by climbing up and over the crib side or by leaning against the side of the crib. The mattress should be at the lowest level by the time the child learns to stand.

Children at this age will use various items to pull up on. Be aware of cleaning buckets. Always empty cleaning buckets of liquid after using because young children have been known to drown after falling into buckets holding only two inches of water.

Child safety gates can and should be used into the toddler years to keep children away from stairs. Children should not be allowed to climb stairs alone until they can safely negotiate steps. This usually occurs around the age of two, but may be later for some children. Child safety straps will not always keep babies from falling out of baby furniture and play items. Never leave babies unattended in highchairs, swings or other baby equipment.

### **The Toddler Years (ages 1-3)**

Children of this age enjoy running, climbing, mimicking adults, and

exploring all kinds of things. During this time their physical abilities are increasing rapidly. However, their ability to understand the consequences of their actions is not developed.

Burns are a serious concern for children of this age. Keep young children away from appliances such as irons, curling irons, blow dryers, heaters, and toasters to prevent burns. Turn handles on pots and pans away from the front of the stove so that young children cannot reach them and pull them over. Whenever possible, you should use the back burner on the stove.

Many children find themselves in serious trouble by climbing on things. An anti-tip device installed on the stove will prevent it from toppling when a child climbs on it. Children have been killed when crushed by kitchen stoves. Other furnishings, such as bookshelves, Grandfather clocks, a chest of drawers, or a china cabinet, can be secured to the wall to prevent them from toppling on a child. Toy chests should have a safety latch to prevent the lid from falling on a child. Falling lids can kill or seriously injure children.

Like older infants, toddlers will put anything in their mouths. Caregivers can protect children from the hazard of choking by keeping small items, such as coins, marbles, safety pins, tacks, etc., out of their reach. If the item is smaller than a quarter, it is too small for a young child.

To prevent the possibility of electrical shock, safety plugs should be in all electrical outlets that aren't in use or covered by appliances or furniture. Children should not be allowed to plug in appliances or to turn appliances on or off.

### **The Young Child (ages 3-5)**

Children of this age have much improved physical coordination. They also have a great desire to do things independently of caregivers. Coupled with this independence is an active imagination. The combination of skills, independence, and fantasy can be dangerous, because although they can practice some self-control, their physical abilities are still ahead of their judgment.

Children of this age should not be allowed to play with matches or lighters. These devices should always be stored out of reach of children. Additionally, children should never be left unattended to play near fireplaces, grills, or any type of open flame.

Like fire, water is fascinating to children of all ages. Backyard pools, children's wading pools, creeks, ponds, streams, etc. can be very dangerous for the young child. Children should be well supervised whenever

they are around any body of water. Wading pools should be emptied when not in use. A locked fence, at least 4 feet high, should be used to protect backyard pools.

### **Other Concerns for Children of All Ages**

The cords on window treatments can be dangerous for young children. Cords from blinds and draperies have been known to strangle children under the age of five. To prevent this, caregivers can install cord wraps. Cord wraps are devices that mount on the window frame. The cord of the window treatment is wrapped around the device and out of reach of children. Infant cribs should not be placed near a window because children under the age of 18 months have become entangled in cords for window coverings.

Windows should be kept closed in areas where children sleep and play to prevent young children from falling out. If a window must be opened, it should be opened no more than two inches. Window screens will keep bugs and debris from entering a home, but they cannot support the weight of a child and should not be relied upon to prevent children from falling out of open windows. All windows should have locks to prevent children from opening them. When arranging rooms, furniture that can be climbed on, such as beds, chairs, and desks, should not be placed near the window.

Children under the age of five are the most frequent victims of poisoning. There are many things caregivers can do to prevent childhood poisonings. All potentially hazardous materials, including medicines, cleaners and pesticides, should be kept in a locked cabinet. Because children like to mimic adults, caregivers should never take medications in front of them and should never refer to medicine as candy. Caregivers should take extra precautions to make certain that all child resistant and childproof closures should be in place. When thinking about potentially poisonous household items, caregivers should not overlook household plants. Common plants such as the philodendron and dieffenbachia, contain a substance that can irritate the mouth and throat causing swelling that impairs breathing. Wild mushrooms have been known to cause death in young children. Even garden plants such as the tomato and potato have toxic parts. The best thing caregivers can do is to become familiar with toxic plants and keep children away from them.

## **Summary**

There are many precautions caregivers can take to ensure that the children under their care are having safe environments in which to grow and play.

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