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Keeping Kids Safe

WINDOWS, SHARP CORNERS, CLEANING SUPPLIES—YOU MIGHT BE SURPRISED WHERE THE BIGGEST DANGERS ARE. HERE'S HOW TO CHILDPROOF A HOME.

By Gretchen Cook

“Never leave your baby unattended!” It’s what the child-safety guides tell you. But toddlers sometimes move as fast as Olympic athletes—and parents don’t.

Every year, more than 4 million children under 14 are treated for injuries inflicted in the home, according to the National Safety Council. What’s a parent to do?

Safety Firsts

Childproofing can seem an overwhelming task, especially in a big house, but prioritizing problem areas can make it easier. It also helps to think age-appropriately: Toddlers like swallowing refrigerator magnets; five-year-olds prefer matches.

To start, scout out dangers from a child’s-eye view—about 40 inches from the floor. While you’re down there, check for buried treasures like pennies and pins. Consider buying nontoxic carpets and rugs, which are free of chemicals such as formaldehyde.

Outlet covers prevent electrocutions. Never run electrical cords under rugs and keep loose lengths of cords tied up and out of reach so little kids can’t yank down lamps, TVs, or other appliances.

It’s a good idea to install a fireplace screen to prevent soot inhalation. Barriers can be placed around radiators and space heaters.

Babies don’t need to leave their rooms to stir up trouble. Here are some tips for keeping the nursery safe:

- Changing tables should have belts to secure children during changings.
- Cutouts and spaces between crib slats should be narrower than the baby’s head.

- Blankets, pillows, and stuffed toys pose suffocation and fire risks. Melody Kisor, founder of the Baby Duck childproofing-education service, advises parents to keep the crib empty of accouterments the first year.
- Never place furniture next to windows —kids love to climb.

What Are the Risks?

“Parents are consumed by what kids put in their mouths when what they should really worry about is what they’re running into,” says John Ulczcki, director of communications for the NSC.

While choking injures 17,500 children every year, 1 1/2 million are treated for injuries from bumping into or being hit by household items. Edge covers can soften sharp edges on furniture and tub faucets. Foam pipe insulators, slit up the sides, make inexpensive covers.

Consider removing those rubber doorstops, which are surprisingly popular with curious mouths. Small toys and pacifiers can cause choking. Although you can’t scoop up every choking hazard, immediate dangers can be evaluated with a “choke tube” (\$4 at onestepahead.com). The tubes are sized so that anything that fits through them is small enough to be a hazard for children under three.

Preventing Plunges

Don’t wait until they’re crawling: That can happen overnight. Most childhood injuries result from falls, so you don’t want to get caught with your baby gate down.

Gates and playpens continue to evolve in function and form. Now you’ll find upscale woods and smaller slat openings or mesh.

Check for an approval stamp from the Juvenile Products Manufacturers Association, which has developed voluntary industry standards for gates. Spring-loaded or pressure-bar mounts allow for quick installation and don’t leave holes in the walls. These are great for temporary use—like in the grandparents’ home—but when blocking off stairs, pressure mounts should go only at the bottom, as they can pop out. Make sure the gate door doesn’t swing out over the stairs.

Lock It Up

Every 30 seconds a child is poisoned in the United States. About 40 percent of those incidents involve medications; 60 percent are caused by things like cleansers, cosmetics, pesticides, spices, and houseplants. Special locks in bathrooms, kitchens, and utility rooms can prevent that.

A variety of devices keep appliance doors secure and cabinet doors

inaccessible. Options include door locks with magnetic keys, doorknob covers that must be squeezed to turn, and automatic door closers that keep doors shut when you forget. For folding closet doors, bi-fold locks slip over the joining panels. Consider installing alarms on doors that lead to high-risk areas like pools. Rubber finger-pinch guards protect little digits from unlocked doors.

Don't forget the windows. Child-safety locks are available for most styles. Some limit the height or width of the opening. Others use bars, which should be no more than four inches apart, to prevent children from squeezing through. Blind and curtain cords should be tied up.

Protection devices should be easily removable in case of fire.

Safe at Grandma's

Grandparents' homes need protection, too. According to the National Safe Kids Campaign, one in five accidental poisonings in children under five involves grandparents and their medications.

Parents say it's hard to convince grandparents that they need to childproof. They may not understand the need for all these new devices. Diplomacy is key, along with easily removable gates and playpens, portable electrical outlet covers, and locks like Safety 1st's Tot-Lok, which locks cabinet doors from the inside and opens only with a magnetic key. It's not so handy for frequently used areas, but it's good for traveling.

Childproof in Style

How do you safeguard your kids—and your aesthetic tastes—in child-unfriendly lofts? "Tether them," jokes Bethesda periodontist David Schneider, who was thrilled to find the Play Den by KidCo. He liked that the Play Den could be rearranged—it's a floorless pen of linked panels—for the unusual spaces in his house, then whipped out of sight.

Contractor Cheryl Campbell, of Urban Revivals in Northwest DC (202-486-6943; urbanrevivals.com), customizes childproofing devices, such as baby gates, to suit a home's decor.

Childproofing Services

These companies will send experts to a home to assess hazards room by room and to recommend solutions. They also sell and install safety products:

Baby's Home Safe Home, Columbia; 410-308-2229.

Children's Safety Care, Gaithersburg; 301-977-8334;

childrenssafetycare.com.

Safe & Sound, Rockville; 301-212-9299; safetysteps.com.

Safe Start, Purcellville; 888-240-7233; safestartbabyproofing.com. Also Red Cross- certified instructors for CPR and first-aid training.

Information and Courses

Safe Kids, 202-662-0600, safekids.org. A national nonprofit that offers safety tips, product recalls, and other information on childproofing for cars and homes.

The Baby Duck Childbirth Education, Alexandria; 703-217-8733; thebabyduck.com. Child-health expert Melody Kisor offers classes on child safety as well as pregnancy, birthing, and breastfeeding.

Online Help

DC Urban Mom, dcurbanmom.com. A listserv in which parents share information on everything from doctors to schools to childproofers and kid-friendly events.

DC Metro Dads, dcmetrodads.com. A listserv and network for stay-at-home fathers living in the Washington area.

Washington Parent Online, washingtonparent.com. This magazine's Web site offers tips, articles, and event schedules for area moms and dads.

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Dog owner Gretchen Cook (gc20009@yahoo.com) is now researching tips on pet-proofing.

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