Child-Proofing Your Home: 12 Safety Devices to Protect Your Children

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About 2.5 million children are injured or killed by hazards in the home each year. The good news is that many of these incidents can be prevented by using simple child-safety devices on the market today. Any safety device you buy should be sturdy enough to prevent injury to your child, yet easy for you to use. It's important to follow installation instructions carefully.

In addition, if you have older children in the house, be sure they re-secure safety devices. Remember, too, that no device is completely childproof; determined youngsters have been known to disable them. You can childproof your home for a fraction of what it would cost to have a professional do it. And safety devices are easy to find. You can buy them at hardware stores, baby equipment shops, supermarkets, drug stores, home and linen stores, and through online and mail-order catalogues.

InterNACHI inspectors, too, should know what to tell clients who are concerned about the safety of their children. Here are some child-safety devices that can help prevent many injuries to young children.

1. Use safety latches and locks for cabinets and drawers in kitchens, bathrooms, and other areas to help prevent poisonings and other injuries. Safety latches and locks on cabinets and drawers can help prevent children from gaining access to medicines and household cleaners, as well as knives and other sharp objects.

Look for safety latches and locks that adults can easily install and use, but that are sturdy enough to withstand pulls and tugs from children. Safety latches are not a guarantee of protection, but they can make it more difficult for children to reach dangerous substances. Even products with child-resistant packaging should be locked away out of reach; this packaging is not childproof.

But, according to Colleen Driscoll, executive director of the International Association for Child Safety (IAFCS), "Installing an ineffective latch on a cabinet is not an answer for helping parents with safety. It is important to understand parental habits and behavior. While a latch that loops around cabinet knob covers is not expensive and easy to install, most parents do not consistently re-latch it."

Parents should be sure to purchase and install safety products that they will actually adapt to and use.

2. Use safety gates to help prevent falls down stairs and to keep children away from dangerous areas. Look for safety gates that children cannot dislodge easily, but that adults can open and close without difficulty. For the top of stairs, gates that screw into the wall are more secure than "pressure gates."

New safety gates that meet safety standards display a certification seal from the Juvenile Products Manufacturers Association (JPMA). If you have an older safety gate, be sure it doesn't have "V" shapes that are large enough for a child's head and neck to fit into.

3. Use door locks to help prevent children from entering rooms and other areas with possible dangers, including swimming pools.

To prevent access to swimming pools, door locks on safety gates should be placed high, out of reach of young children. Locks should be used in addition to fences and alarms. Sliding glass doors with locks that must be re-secured after each use are often not an effective barrier to pool access.

Door knob covers, while inexpensive and recommended by some, are generally not effective for children who are tall enough to reach the doorknob; a child's ingenuity and persistence can usually trump the cover's effectiveness.

4. Use anti-scald devices for faucets and shower heads, and set your water heater temperature to 120° F to help prevent burns from hot water. A plumber may need to install these.

5. Use smoke detectors on every level of your home and near bedrooms to alert you to fires. Smoke detectors are essential safety devices for protection against fire deaths and injuries. Check smoke detectors once a month to make sure they're working. If detectors are battery-operated, change batteries at least once a year, or consider using 10-year batteries.

6. Use window guards and safety netting to help prevent falls from windows, balconies, decks and landings. Window guards and safety netting for balconies and decks can help prevent serious falls. Check these safety devices frequently to make sure they are secure and properly installed and maintained. There should be no more than 4 inches between the bars of the window guard. If you have window guards, be sure at least one window in each room can be easily used for escape in a fire. Window screens are not effective for preventing children from falling out of windows.

7. Use corner and edge bumpers to help prevent injuries from falls against sharp edges of furniture and fireplaces. Corner and edge bumpers can be used with furniture and fireplace hearths to help prevent injuries

from falls, and to soften falls against sharp and rough edges.

Be sure to look for bumpers that stay securely on furniture and hearth edges.

8. Use receptacle or outlet covers and plates to help prevent children from electrical shock and possible electrocution.

Be sure the outlet protectors cannot be easily removed by children and are large enough so that children cannot choke on them.

9. Use a carbon monoxide (CO) detector outside bedrooms to help prevent CO poisoning. Consumers should install CO detectors near sleeping areas in their homes. Households that should use CO detectors include those with gas or oil heat or with attached garages.

10. Cut window blind cords to help prevent children from strangling in blind-cord loops. Window blind cord safety tassels on mini blinds and tension devices on vertical blinds and drapery cords can help prevent deaths and injuries from strangulation in the loops of cords. Inner cord stops can help prevent strangulation in the inner cords of window blinds.

However, the IAFCS's Ms. Driscoll states, "Cordless is best. Although not all families are able to replace all products, it is important that parents understand that any corded blind or window treatment can still be a

hazard. Unfortunately, children are still becoming entrapped in dangerous blind cords despite advances in safety in recent years."

For older mini blinds, cut the cord loop, remove the buckle, and put safety tassels on each cord. Be sure that older vertical blinds and drapery cords have tension or tie-down devices to hold the cords tight. When buying new mini blinds, vertical blinds and draperies, ask for safety features to prevent child strangulation.

11. Use door stops and door holders to help prevent injuries to fingers and hands. Door stops and door holders on doors and door hinges can help prevent small fingers and hands from being pinched or crushed in doors and door hinges.

Be sure any safety device for doors is easy to use and is not likely to break into small parts, which could be a choking hazard for young children.

12. Use a cell or cordless phone to make it easier to continuously watch young children, especially when they're in bathtubs, swimming pools, or other potentially dangerous areas. Cordless phones help you watch your child continuously without leaving the vicinity to answer a phone call. Cordless phones are especially helpful when children are in or near water, whether it's the bathtub, the swimming pool, or the beach.7777

In summary, there are a number of different safety devices that can be purchased to ensure the safety of children in the home. Homeowners can ask an InterNACHI inspector about these and other safety measures during their next inspection. Parents should be sure to do their own consumer research to find the most effective safety devices for their home that are age-appropriate for their children's protection, as well as affordable and compatible with their household habits and lifestyles.

