

Preventing falls



The Royal Children's Hospital Safety Centre, Melbourne 2008

Falls are the most common single cause of hospital-treated injury in all age groups. From the time your child starts to roll, crawl and climb there is the ever-present risk of falls.

Slips and falls can be a normal part of growing up, for example when a child is learning to walk. Many falls are not serious and may simply result in a bump or bruise; others may result in fractures, cuts or head injuries. There are many actions you can take to prevent the more serious injuries.

There are three important factors which influence the seriousness of a fall:

1. The height the child can fall from: The lower the height the lower the danger. Children under 5 should not have access to heights over 1.5 metres. Older children should not have access to heights over 2 metres.

2. What the child falls onto: Hard surfaces such as concrete, ceramic tiles, even compacted sand are more hazardous to fall onto than softer surfaces. Impact absorbing or soft fall materials under play equipment are recommended to provide a softer landing. A depth of 300mm is required and this needs to be maintained.

3. What the child may hit as they fall: Place sharp edged furniture such as coffee tables to the side where a child is unlikely to fall on to them.

Glass may cause serious injury, therefore consider using safety glass or shatter resistant film. Make glass doors visible with stickers at a child's eye level. Place furniture so that children cannot run into windows or fall from furniture into glass. Low-level glass should be replaced with safety glass whenever glass is replaced in existing homes.

Rate of fall injuries

At least 42% of hospital treated falls that happen to children aged 0–14 years occur in the home and a fifth (20%) in educational settings.

Boys experience a higher hospitalisation rate as a result of falls than girls in all age groups.

Main causes of falls

Fall injury is common in the bathroom due to the combination of water and potentially slippery surfaces.

For children under 5 years of age most falls occur:

- from nursery furniture including baby walkers
- onto furniture and down stairs
- on the same level (as compared to falls on steps and stairs).

In the older age group (5–14 years of age) most falls occur:

- from playground equipment
- from bunk beds and other furniture
- in sports-related activities such as using trampolines, in-line skates, roller skates, skateboards and bicycles.

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Safety Centre

Prevention of falls

Preventing falls with babies

Place babies where they cannot fall. Babies wriggle from birth and it is not long before they learn to roll over. Babies may unexpectedly fall from a bed or change table. Always keep one hand on your baby when using a change table. Whenever feasible use the floor when changing a baby.

An active baby may move a bouncinette causing it to fall from a table or bench top. Do not place bouncinettes above floor level. When babies have learnt to roll they can easily move across an area into danger.

Never carry your baby around in bouncinettes or rocker chairs. Never place these products on tables or raised surfaces when your baby is using them.

Preventing falls with toddlers

A standing and toddling baby has frequent minor falls. To minimise these, look at the environment from their level.

Create a clear area, removing tripping hazards such as rugs and electrical cords. Pad sharp corners of benches and tables, or remove them from the play area.

Use a full body (five point) harness in high chairs, strollers and shopping trolleys.

Do not use baby walkers. They give a young child the mobility to place them in danger quickly and unexpectedly.

Be aware that falls are more common when a child is tired or unwell. Plan quiet activities for these occasions.

Use a safety gate at the top and bottom of stairs.

Use a sensor light for stairs and steps

Preventing falls with children

Once a child has learnt to walk they quickly manage to climb and usually enjoy this activity. The pre-school child has the physical ability to reach heights but has no fear or understanding of the consequences of a fall.

Lock windows in multi-storey buildings so that children cannot climb out, or ensure that they have restricted openings of less than 100mm.

Scissors, knives or glasses are some of the sharp objects which may cause serious injury if a child falls. Discourage children from walking or running with these objects, especially in their mouths.

Suggested ways to protect your child from falls

Furniture

Children can sustain serious harm including head injuries after falling from nursery furniture.

If your child is continually trying to climb out of the cot leave the sides down. When your child is ready to move from a cot to a bed, place a mattress on the floor to soften a fall.

Bunk beds are not recommended for children under 9 years of age. Do not let children play on bunk beds and ensure top bunk beds have a guardrail.

Place sharp edged furniture such as coffee and bedside tables where a child is unlikely to fall on to them.

Remove from the cot any toys that your baby can use to climb on and fall out.

Ensure moving products such as prams have workable braking devices and locks.

Slippery areas

Where slippery surfaces are walked on use a:

- nightlight in passageways and bathrooms/toilets
- slip resistant bath/shower surfaces
- slip resistant floor surfaces.

When wet, some surfaces become extremely slippery for all age groups. A kitchen floor with water on it becomes a crash scene for a toddler. Therefore, wiping up spills quickly is important. Encourage children to sit when drinking to reduce spills.

Bathroom floors are often hard, wet surfaces. Use rubber mats to help reduce slipping. There are anti-slip flooring products commercially available to assist in indoor and outdoor areas. Products such as safety walk tape, rubberised paint, slip resistant concrete spray and lock matting are examples of products available.

Playground equipment and outside

The older child may have an understanding of danger but may still take risks. Playgrounds are for the purpose of fun. They can be designed for adventure and safety. Good design, placement and maintenance of play equipment will reduce the likelihood of severe injury, whether this is at home, at school or in a public playground. Carefully placed playground equipment will discourage children from walking in front of a swing or falling from one piece and hitting another.

Playgrounds can be made safer by the choice of equipment of an appropriate height, the provision of safety rails, the size of the bars and the layout of the equipment.

Good under surfacing for play equipment kept at a depth of 300mm is of utmost importance.

Children should use playground equipment in a fenced backyard or a park that is suitable for their size and age. Trampolines are not recommended for children under 6 years of age.

For children under 5 years, it is safer to use play equipment that is less than 1.5 metres in height and for older children, less than 2 metres.

An Australian Standards approved bicycle helmet must be used by children when riding a bike. It is also advisable for a young child to wear a helmet when using a tricycle in the backyard and for older children when using in-line skates, roller skates, skateboards and scooters.

Statistics are based on those provided by the Victorian Injury Surveillance Unit, Monash University. Figures have been rounded off for ease of reading.

For further information:

Consumer Affairs Victoria
1300 558 181 or
www.consumer.vic.gov.au

References:

Safe Products for your baby. Consumer Affairs Victoria.

For further information
about the Safety Centre
Telephone 9345 5085

www.rch.org.au/safetycentre

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