HOME SAFETY AND PREVENTION OF HOME ACCIDENTS IN YOUNG CHILDREN

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Home is a wonderful place to care for the children. Home is where we feel safe. However, many of us are not aware that home is also a place where dangers lurk. I am referring to the dangers that we expose our young children to at home if we do not take the necessary precautions. Childhood accident is a significant cause of morbidity and mortality in Singapore. Some safety experts believe that most accidents are preventable, and when they are not, the injuries that result from them often are. The home is the commonest place of accident, accounting for almost 70% of a study cohort in Singapore.

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The general practitioner, as a family physician, plays an important role in educating the family on home safety. Parents may seek his advice and are extremely receptive on preventive measures on home safety, especially when their precious one is seeking medical attention for an injury sustained at home.

This article will give practical tips on how to prevent avoidable accidents in the home so that the child can develop himself in a safe environment.

**Three factors involved**

There are 3 factors that must come together to result in an accident:
- The child
- Object
- Environment

**The child**

Parents have to be extra vigilant during circumstances that increase the likelihood of accidents in the child
- Hunger/fatigue
- Illness/stress
- Change in care-giver

To minimize the risk,
- Teach the child what is safe and what is unsafe (and why)
- Build a vocabulary of warning words like hot, sharp, ouch etc
- Teach the child not to play when he has food in his mouth to prevent choking
- Do not tell a child that medicine is candy in an attempt to persuade him to take it
- Avoid loose clothing and long cords that may get entangled and cause suffocation
- Teach the child not to play with plastic bags
- Teach the child about fire safety
- Equip the care-giver with common safety knowledge and basic first aid skill

**The Object**

Parents should avoid using things that pose a higher risk to their children.
Avoid baby walkers – they are dangerous and can tip over. If you want to use them, do so with direct supervision rather than leaving them alone. By the way, they do not help babies to walk earlier

- Use high chairs with a waist strap and a broad base to reduce the risk of toppling over
- Keep sides of playpens and cribs up always
- Avoid toys with sharp pointed edges or long cords to prevent penetrating injuries and suffocation
- Check toys to make sure they contain non-toxic, non-poisonous materials
- Ensure that toys have no small parts that could be detached off and swallowed
- Avoid feeding young children nuts, hard candies, and popcorn. Cut hot dogs into small bites and not round slices
- Keep all sharp objects (knives, razors, needles, pens, glass etc) out of reach
- Buy products and medicine with child-proof caps
- Keep purses out of reach to prevent children from getting to the coins
- Avoid jewellery like necklace or those with small beads that may come off the chain

The Environment

This is especially important as most parents are working and their children are left in the care of maids. Even when the parents are back after a day’s hard work, they are usually too tired to keep an eye on the children all the time. By manipulating the home condition, parents can make the home a safer place for their children.

1. The Kitchen

- Rearrange potentially dangerous objects and hazardous cleaning compounds to upper cabinets and drawers.
- Install child-proof locks on all lower drawers and cabinets
- Use the back burners and turn the pot-handles towards the center or rear of the stove so the child can’t reach them
- Always know about your child whereabouts when you are carrying hot drinks or food
- Never store hazardous substances in unmarked or food containers
- Never use a microwave oven to warm baby’s bottle or food in jars
- Don’t sit your child on a counter top to play while you work
- Unplug the electrical appliances. Keep electrical cords out of reach of children
- Avoid preparing food in sizes and consistency that children can easily choke on
- Store lighters and matches out of reach of children
- Install a smoke detector

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2. The Bathroom

- Never leave your child alone in the bathroom
- Ensure that the doors can be unlocked from both sides
- Keep toilet lids closed
- Use rubber mats on the floor to prevent slipping
- Never leave the bath-tub or pail filled with water when not in use as they present a drowning hazard
- Never leave your child unattended in the bath tub
- Unplug electrical appliances
- Keep all bath products out of the child’s reach and in locked drawers or cabinets
- Keep the water temperature < 45°C by installing taps that are able to control the degree of temperature of the water if your child can access the taps easily

3. The Living and Dining Hall

- Position furniture so that they do not topple easily
- Chose furniture with rounded corners or cover all protruding or sharp corners with plastic bumpers
- Keep electric cords up and out of the way to prevent children pulling on them
- Install safety switches and electrical power point covers
- Replace worn-out electrical cords and equipments
- Secure carpets and rugs so that children cannot trip
- Mark glass door (using stick-ons) to increase visibility and prevent children from running into it.
- Use safety gates with straight top edges to block access to stairs and other dangerous areas. Avoid gates with bars that can cause entrapment of the child’s head
- Wipe spills from floors immediately
- Use a covered wastebasket that the child cannot open easily
- Avoid using table cloth as the child may tug and pull it off

4. The Bedroom

- Put infants to sleep in a crib and never on an adult bed
- Lower crib mattresses when baby begins to stand
- The crib side should not have space that allows the baby to fall through or the head to squeeze through
- Do not use pillow or bolster for infants. Blankets should have holes for ventilation just in case they cover over the toddlers’ head
- Keep all cosmetic products in the dresser drawer and child-proof it
- Children below the age of 7 years should not be allowed to sleep or play on the upper deck of a double-decker bed
- Avoid using sarong cradles – they are dangerous and have resulted in serious injuries

**General Rules**

- Do not have highly polished floor
- Do not let the child walk about in socks
- All high-rise flats should have window grilles
- Keep child away while you are ironing. Keep the iron out of reach of the child once you are done with it

For the parents themselves, there are a few things that they can do:

1. Keep a fully stocked first aid kit in easy reach of all providers, but out of reach of children. Check the first aid kit regularly and restock it as necessary
2. Keep ice cubes or ice bags in the freezer to use to reduce swelling of some injuries
3. Learn basic first aid through the community club, the Red Cross Society or St John Association

**The First Aid Kit**

The following items are suitable for a first aid kit:

1. **Dressings (to cover wound)**
   - Packet of assorted adhesive plasters.
   - Box of 5 x 5 cm sterile gauze pads.
2. **Bandages (to hold dressings in place)**
   - Roll of adhesive dressing tape.
   - Roll of elastic bandage.
   - Roll of 2.5 cm wide gauze bandage
3. **Clinical thermometer (to measure body temperature)**
4. **Scissors (to be kept solely for first-aid use)**
5. **Pointed tweezers (to remove splinters/stings)**
6. **Roll of sterile cotton wool (to clean wounds)**
7. **Packet of cotton buds (to apply medicine)**
8. **Safety pins (to secure bandages)**
9. Medicines for external use
   – Anti-itch cream/lotion
   – Antiseptic cream/lotion (to prevent infection of cuts/grazes)
   – Mentholated vapor rub
   – Mouthwash/gargle.

10. Medicines for internal use
    – Antacid (to relieve indigestion)
    – Anti-diarrhoea medicine
    – Cough medicine
    – Fever medicine/simple painkiller
    – Throat lozenges

Whilst there is no golden rule to prevent injuries, I hope that the above practical tips can increase the parents’ motivation to make their home a safer place for their children.